RHAPSODY IN BLUE

A Restored And Definite Transcription For PIANO SOLO

GEORGE GERSHWIN

FOREWORD

Few composers have written material that has been more improvised upon, imitated, fragmented, and generally misinterpreted than George Gershwin's. And at the top of "most defiled" is the Rhapsody in Blue, which, ironically, is the very composition that defined for the classical community for the past seventy years who George Gershwin is. In the most recent edition of Schirmer's Manual of Musical Terms, Theodore Baker refers to Gershwin as a great American songwriter and composer of jazz-flavored "serious" (facetiously quoted by Baker) works. Even the New Grove Dictionary finds his serious compositions "structurally defective... filled with repetitive rather than developed melodies" often "separated by abrupt pauses." These particularly negative assessments are not wrong-if one studies and judges the originally published Rhapsody in Blue for piano solo and the Rhapsody in Blue for piano and orchestra published for two piano/four hands in 1924. What makes these critically devastating assessments so poignantly tragic is the fact that Gershwin's judges were condemning flawed editing, not flawed composing.

A twist of fate and Gershwin's lack of participation in the original publication of the Rhapsody in Blue led to an unanticipated altered composition that was shrouded in unanswered questions for more than half a century. (OUTDATED STATEMENT): To begin with, Gershwin's Rhapsody in Blue has not been in the public domain, which would have yielded access to his original manuscripts. Additionally, Harms Publishing Co., which in 1924 was not in the business of issuing classical music scores, specialized in popular songs and musical theater geared to the great mass of amateur pianists in that era of player pianos and silent movies. The editors at Harms who had been assigned the task of preparing the Rhapsody for publication were classically trained musicians who had been educated in the European traditions that had produced Tchaikovsky and Rachmaninoff. They neither understood Gershwin's style nor did they have any great respect for his lack of conservatory training. They ultimately determined to edit the Rhapsody according to their views on how the piece should be performed. First they deemed it too long. In the piano/orchestra edition, they deleted more than fifty measures in the piano solo part and cut out four measures in the orchestra. My answered query has long been: "Why so much in the piano and so little in the orchestra?" In the piano solo edition of the Rhapsody, eighty-eight measures were eliminated from the original manuscript in Gershwin's hand! Small wonder it was considered fragmented and truncated. The melodies "separated by abrupt pauses" did not exist in Gershwin's manuscript. Beautiful bridges connecting thematic material had been cut in half. Passages that originally were written as an ascent followed by a descent were now simply a descent found somewhere in another register, totally unconnected to what preceded it. In one section, twenty piano solo measures leading to the entrance of the lush final theme were reduced to ten. There is another sixteen-measure section most egregiously and unjustifiably cut out just before the final of the piece. In fact, none of the deletions can be justified because they reflect irresponsible musicianship.

In addition to shortening the Rhapsody by approximately four or five minutes, its editors also brought their own pedagogical style to it. This is to say, they altered Gershwin's own verbal and interpretative directives to the extent that the performance of the piece went from lighthearted

(CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE)

and jazzy to heavy-handed and romantic in the style of the nineteenth century. This is what these turn-of-the-century editors knew, and this was the style of piano playing that was being taught to students and performers. Ultimately, this became the style pianists have been bringing to the Rhapsody to this day. But this is not the style one finds notated in Gershwin's hand.

If Gershwin had personally directed these changes, there would exist proof somewhere. None has been found. We do know that Gershwin gave his blessing to the original publications. He was, in fact, surprised that Harms would have published it at all. We also know that he had expressed his desire to talk to his publishers about the changes sometime in 1933, but never followed up.

What we do have, however, is absolute proof that Gershwin performed his Rhapsody February 12, 1924, as he had originally notated it in his own hand. Two manuscripts exist: the first in Gershwin's hand and the second which is Grofe's orchestrated manuscript. Both scores are identical. Grofe did not alter a single note, chord or any other directive of Gershwin's. Accordingly, Gershwin continued to perform the Rhapsody as he had originally notated it. He also performed it as it had been published. He recorded a nine-minute Rhapsody in 1927 and a short piano solo Rhapsody on piano rolls. Gershwin's adaptability and huge public success no doubt irked some of his contemporaries, which only fired the myth that he was less than masterful as a composer.

Another extension of the myths surrounding Gershwin's genius has to do with the notion that he had not experienced any real evolutionary process that led to his composition of the Rhapsody. Actually, this piece had very definite roots in a major work we had composed in 1922 called Blue Monday. A twenty-minute opera combining Impressionist and Romantic styles with jazz motifs, it yields a fine insight into his command of harmony and music history. Paul Whiteman had conducted Blue Monday for George White's Scandals and was impressed enough to invite Gershwin to compose something similar for his "Experiment in modern music" concert at Aeolian Hall in New York. Rushed to produce a major work for Whiteman, Gershwin dug into his memory (consciously or not) and referred to Blue Monday for this endeavor. He decided upon the rhapsody as a form (a Greek word that, ironically in view of the fate of the Rhapsody, means to "sew together" various musical themes). As it turned out, the seams holding his thematic material together were the very same used by his original editors to cut and unravel the Rhapsody. To add insult to injury, when the Rhapsody for piano solo was created by Harms, rather than consulting the original Gershwin manuscript, most of the orchestral reductions for second piano were used instead.

It is also of interest to note that the second part of the first theme of the Rhapsody, which is also used as its ending, is the same ending of Blue Monday and can be found for the first time in Lullaby, a piano piece written in 1919. It later evolves into The Man I love, written in 1927.

Alicia Zizzo On The Topic Of The Rhapsody

EDITORIAL NOTES

In this edition, you will find that the given work is titled "AMERICAN RHAPSODY". This is not an error, but instead a deliberate restoration of George Gershwin's original vision. When he first set pen to paper in early 1924, he conceived the piece with an "American" mindset. Aiming to capture the pulse, passion, and energy of New York City at the time. Although his brother, Ira, famously suggested the change to the title we know today, this transcription humbly retains Gershwin's primary title.

Within this edition, several distinct thematic labels have been included to guide the performer through the work's rhapsodic structure. These include the RITORNELLO, TRAIN, STRIDE, SHUFFLE, DINNER, and LOVE themes. Each represents a unique facet of the American experience: The iconic bluesy "call" of the Ritornello, the forward momentum of the Train, the ragtime virtuosity of the Stride, the humor of the Shuffle, the sophisticated "metropolitan" atmosphere of the Dinner, and the sweeping romanticism of the Love theme. While these specific classifications are modern analytical tools - largely established by scholars such as David Schiff to help map the piece's complex form - they are rooted in Gershwin's own creative process. Gershwin famously noted that the "thematic" seeds for the Rhapsody germinated during a train trip to Boston, where he was inspired by the "steely rhythms" and "rattle-ty-bang" of the locomotive. These labels are not intended to restrict interpretation, but instead to honor the "American" imagery that birthed the composition.

A defining characteristic of this restoration is the dual-numbering system used for the rehearsal cues. While modern symphonic editions of the Rhapsody typically employ 40 standard markers, Gershwin's original two-piano holograph contains only 34. These primary structural divisions are identified in this score with the suffix "(MS)". By restoring these 34 original points of reference, this edition allows the performer to see the work's "skeleton" as Gershwin initially drafted it. For the benefit of contemporary study and performance, modern rehearsal markers have been integrated alongside these historical cues, providing a bridge between the composer's 1924 thought process and the standard performance tradition used today.

It is essential to acknowledge the legendary debut of this work. The Rhapsody In Blue was commissioned by Paul Whiteman for his "An Experiment in Modern Music" concert, which premiered at Aeolian Hall in New York City on February 12, 1924. In the orchestral conductor's score prepared by Ferde Grofé, the famous music instruction "Wait for Nod" was included - a cue for the band to pause while Gershwin improvised his piano solos. Because this edition prioritizes Gershwin's own two-piano holograph over the orchestral arrangements, that specific cue is omitted here. However, a profound mystery remains: Gershwin did not formally write down the complete piano sections until after the concert, so the exact sound of the original premiere remains unknown. This transcription serves to bridge the gap between that legendary improvisation and the formal manuscript, offering a vision that honors both the composer's intent and unwritten legacy.

PUBLIC DOMAIN DEDICATION

CC0 1.0

Nothing special or exclusive was obtained to create this edition. It is simply the result of dedication to preserve musical history.

Any musician with an internet connection and a bit of time can pull off the same stunt.

The primary source of this transcription is the 1924 Two-Piano Holograph Manuscript, which can be found in digital collections of the Library Of Congress and the International Music Score Library Project (IMSLP).

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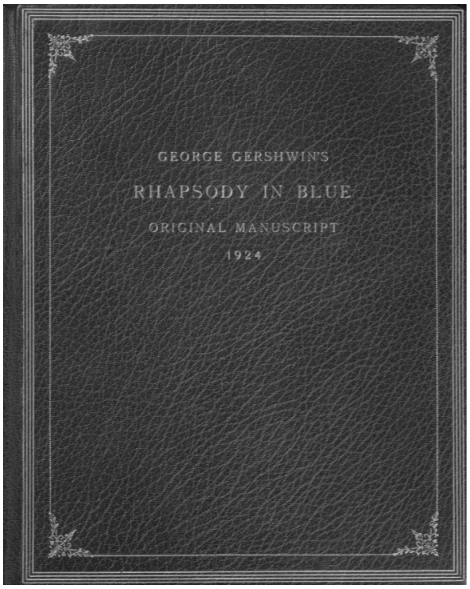


https://imslp.org/wiki/Rhapsody_in_Blue_(Gershwin,_George)

This score was created with Musescore Studio 4 around early 2026.

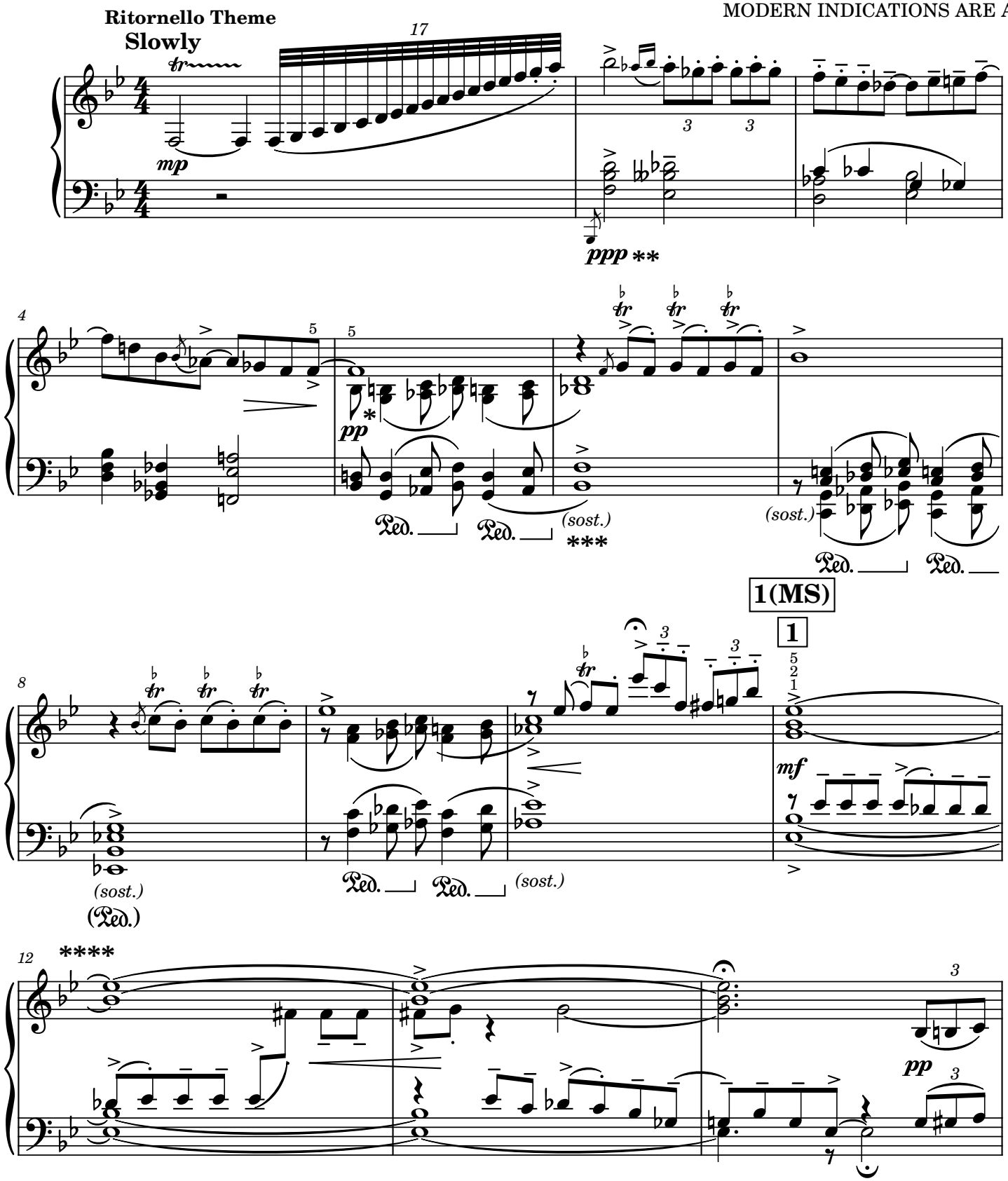
It would be completed in April of that same year.

The musical font used was Bravura.

AMERICAN RHAPSODY

(Rhapsody in Blue)

GEORGE GERSHWIN
BASED OFF OF ORIGINAL MANUSCRIPT (1/7/1924)
MODERN INDICATIONS ARE ADDED

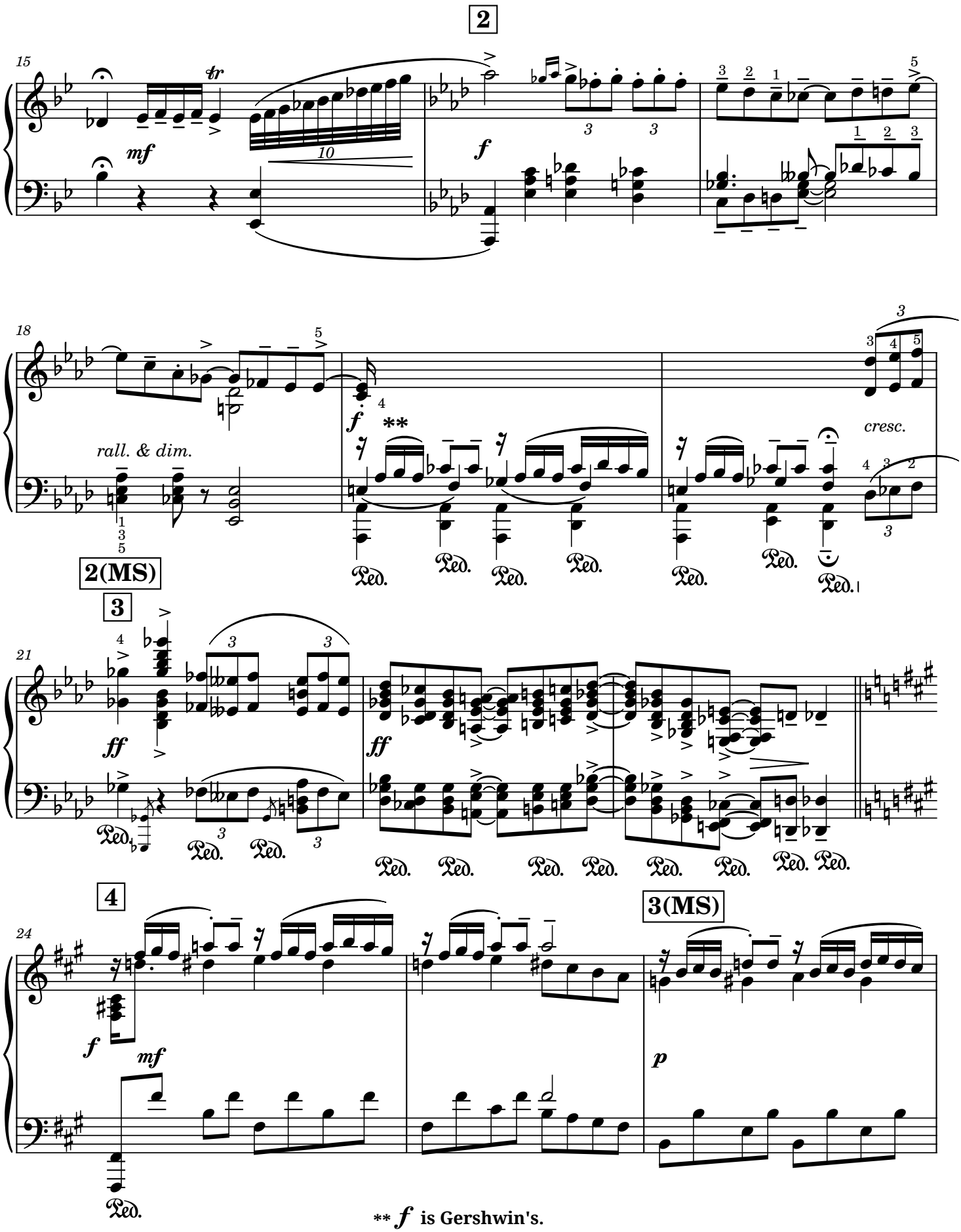


*Phrases, slurs, portamentos, and staccatos on this page are Gershwin's, except grace notes on bars 6 and 8.

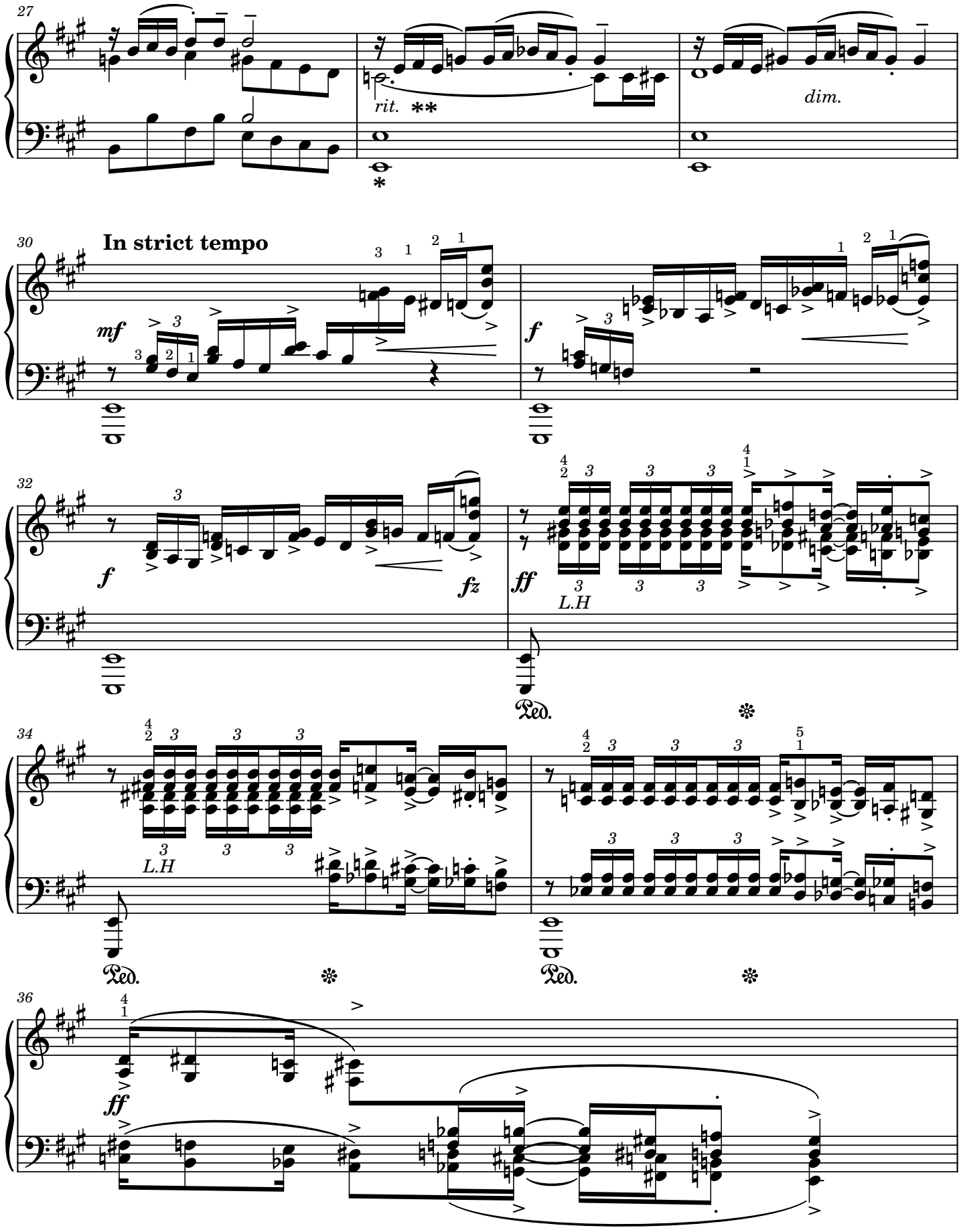
**Gershwin's - as in original manuscript. The performer may substitute *mf* if wished.

***(sost.) denotes middle sostenuto pedal. It is important to "catch" only the notes indicated.

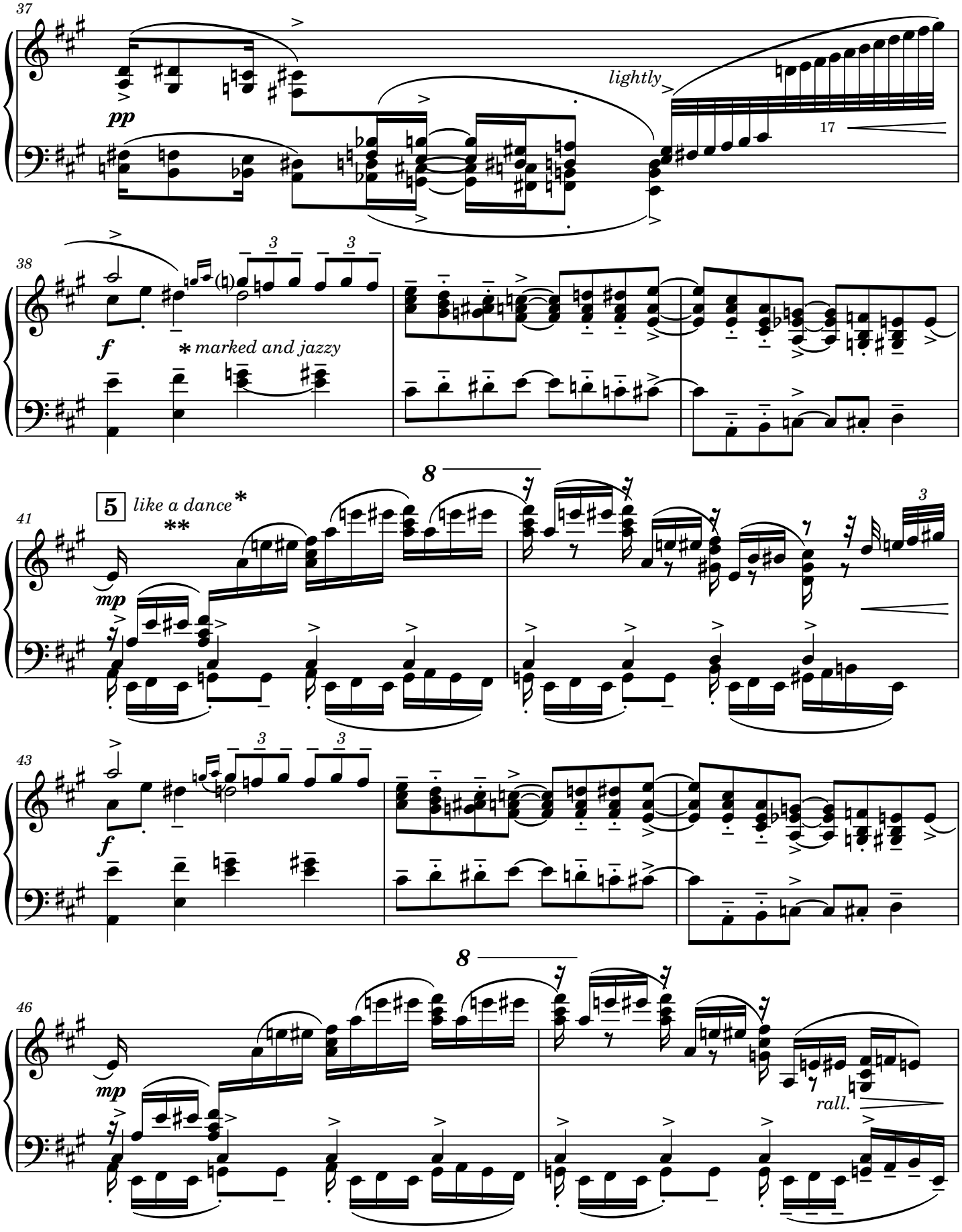
****Phrases, accents, and slurs are Gershwin's except on the last system.



** *f* is Gershwin's.

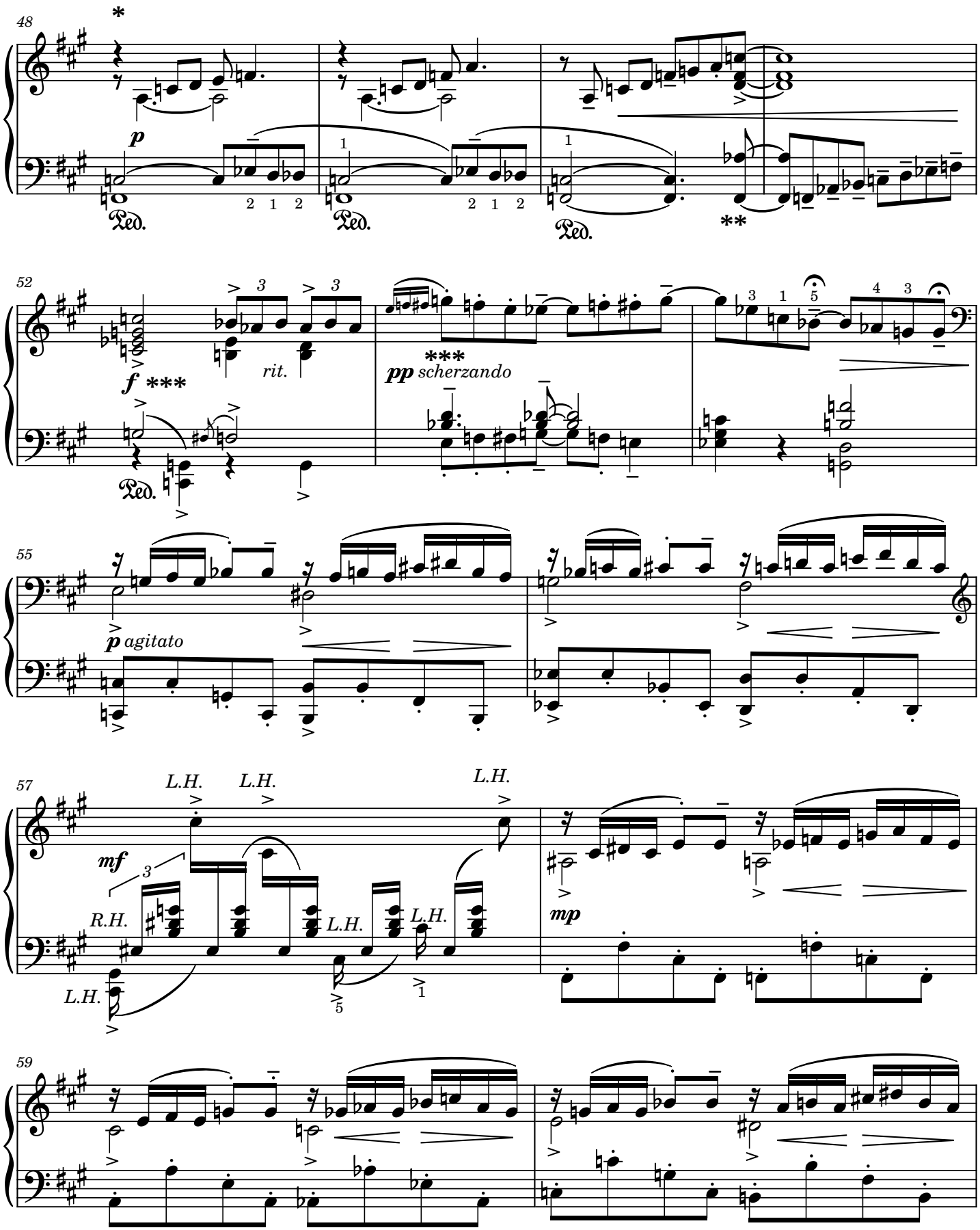


*The word "chord" is written here in ms.
**"Rit.", accents, phrases and staccatos on this page are Gershwin's.



*As indicated in original manuscript.

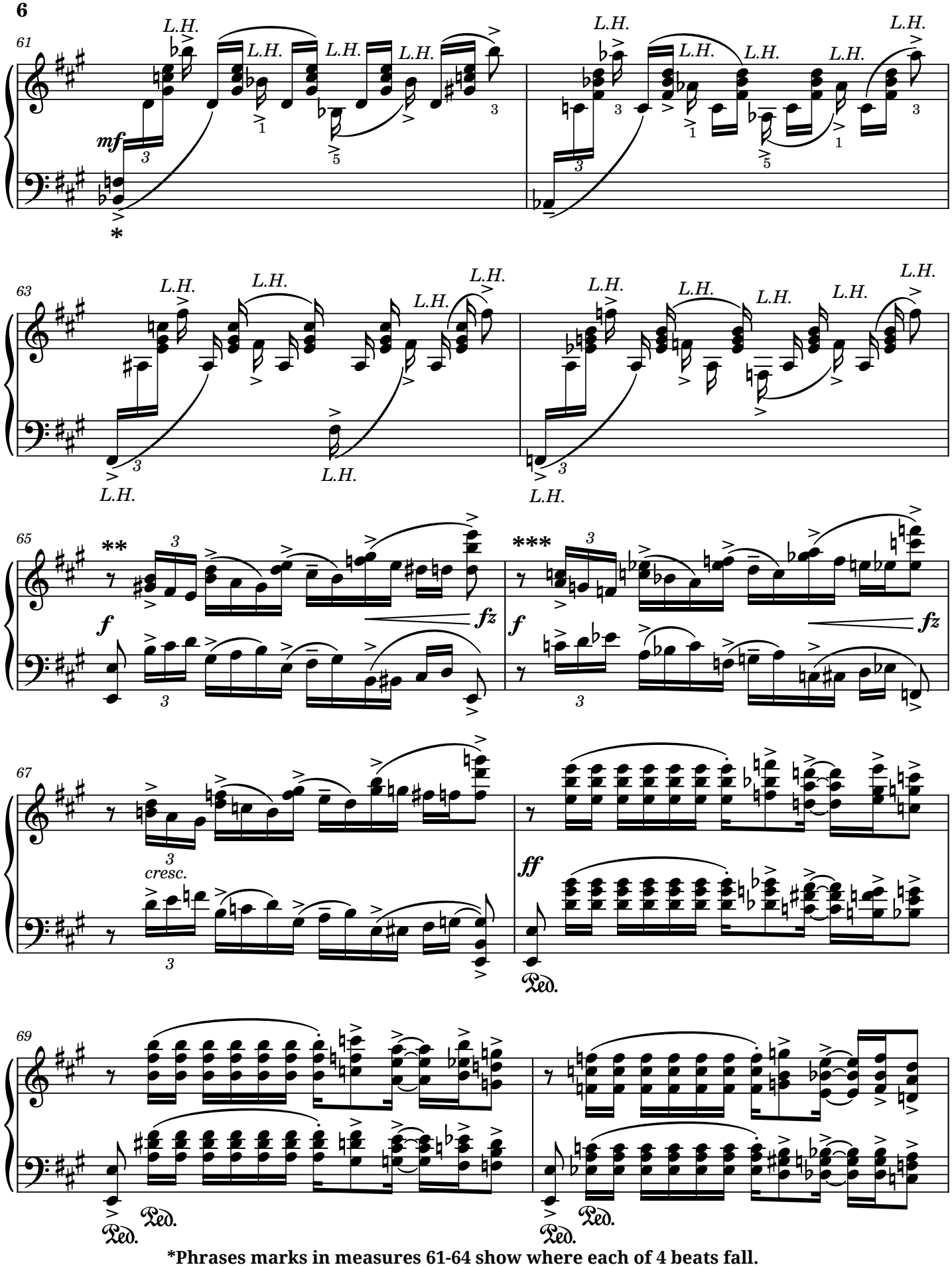
**2 suggested fingerings, and, by eliminating the A from R.H. chords, passages become easier to play.



*All phrases, accents, staccatos, portamentos on this page are Gershwin's except phrases in line 4, bar 1 which may facilitate understanding of this measure rhythmically.

**In original orch. ms., there is a "G" instead if an F natural.

***As in manuscript.



*Phrases marks in measures 61-64 show where each of 4 beats fall.
**Phrases and accents in measures 65, 66 and 67 are Gershwin's.
***The eighth rest must be strictly observed.

4(MS)

6

Train theme

71

mf *cresc.*

73

p

R.H.

76

R.H.

a tempo

ff

5(MS)

7

79

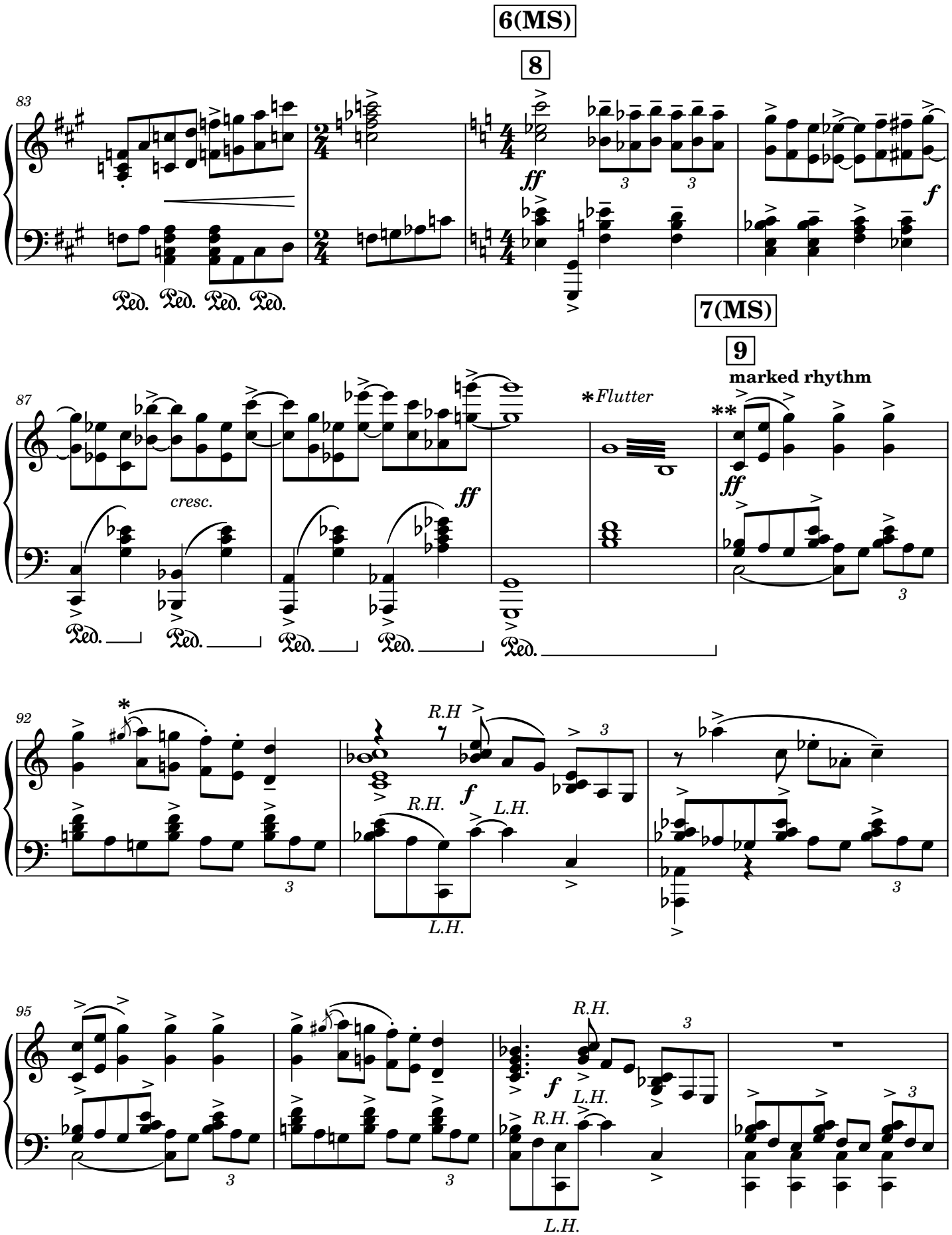
dim.

mp *legato*

mf

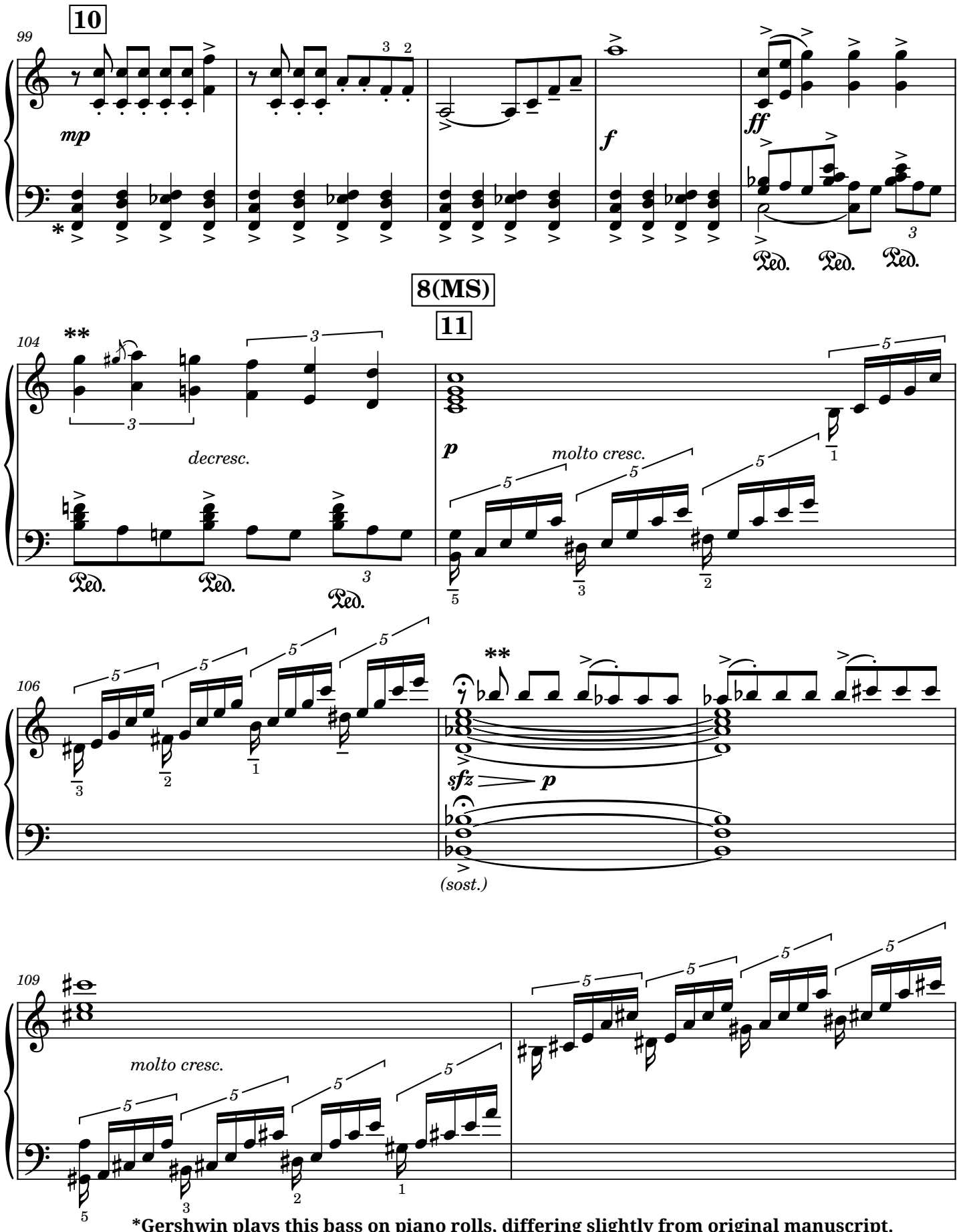
mf

***Original manuscript.**



*As indicated in original manuscript.

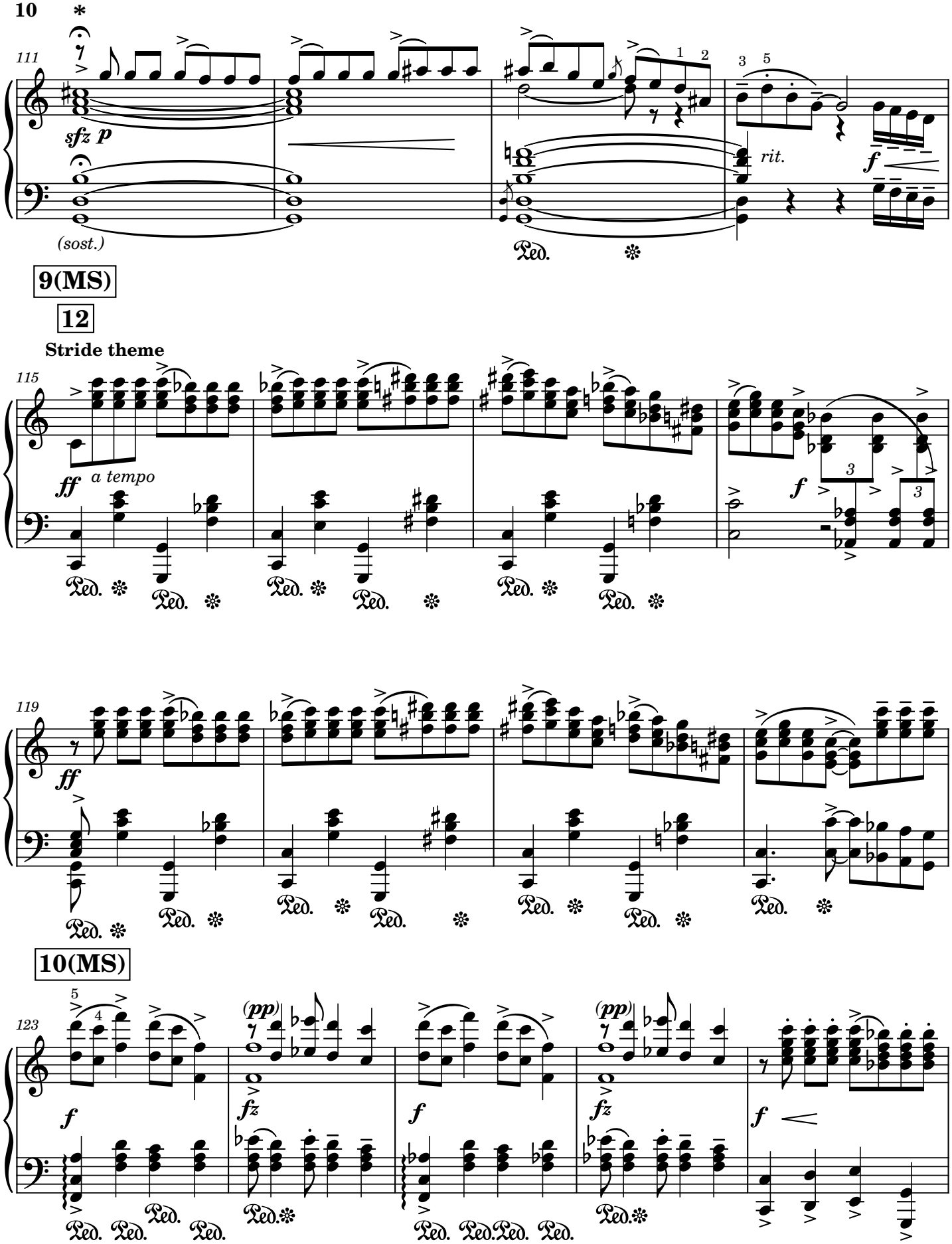
**L.H. cross over is optional but recommended for greater ease of performance.



*Gershwin plays this bass on piano rolls, differing slightly from original manuscript.

**Optional rhythm in treble clef:

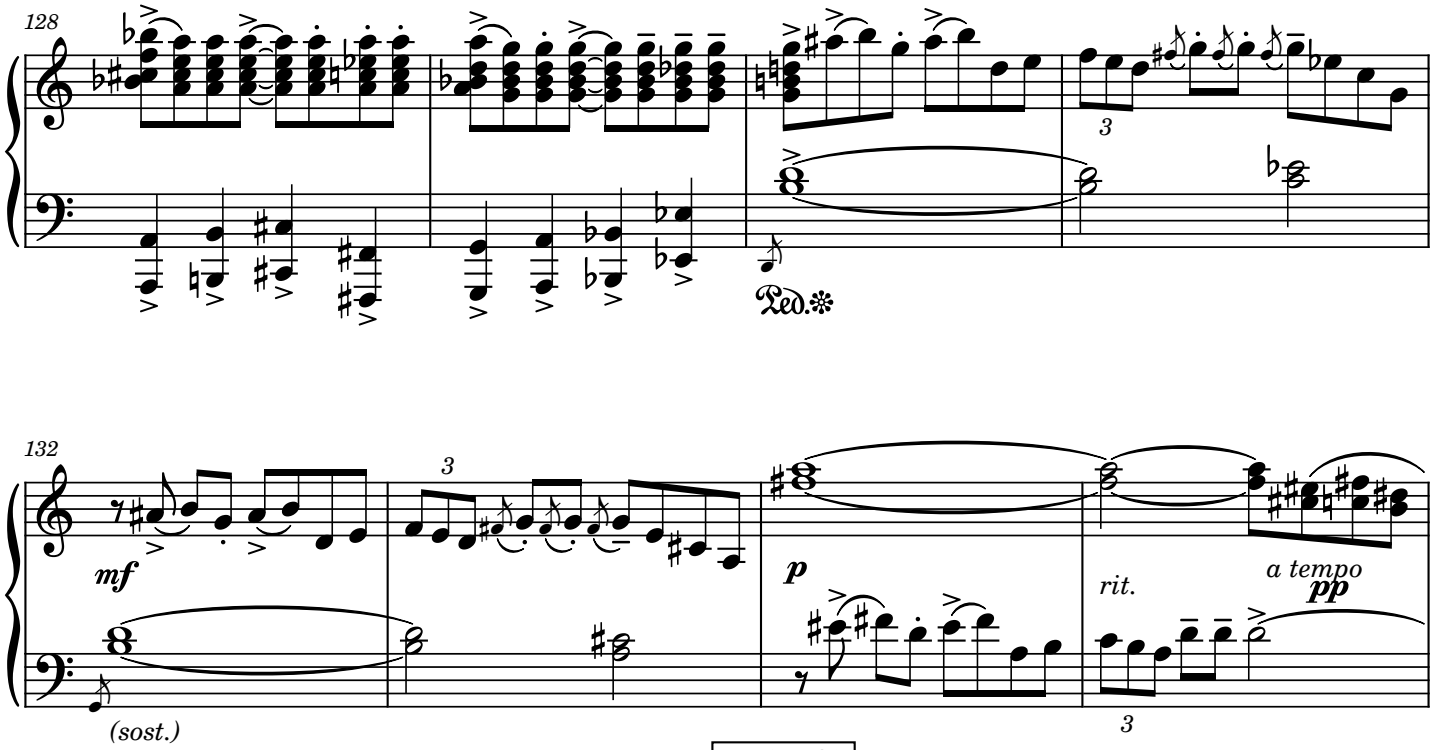
***In original manuscript, no sixteenth notes are indicated, as in previous edition.



*If possible, chords should not be broken.

11(MS)

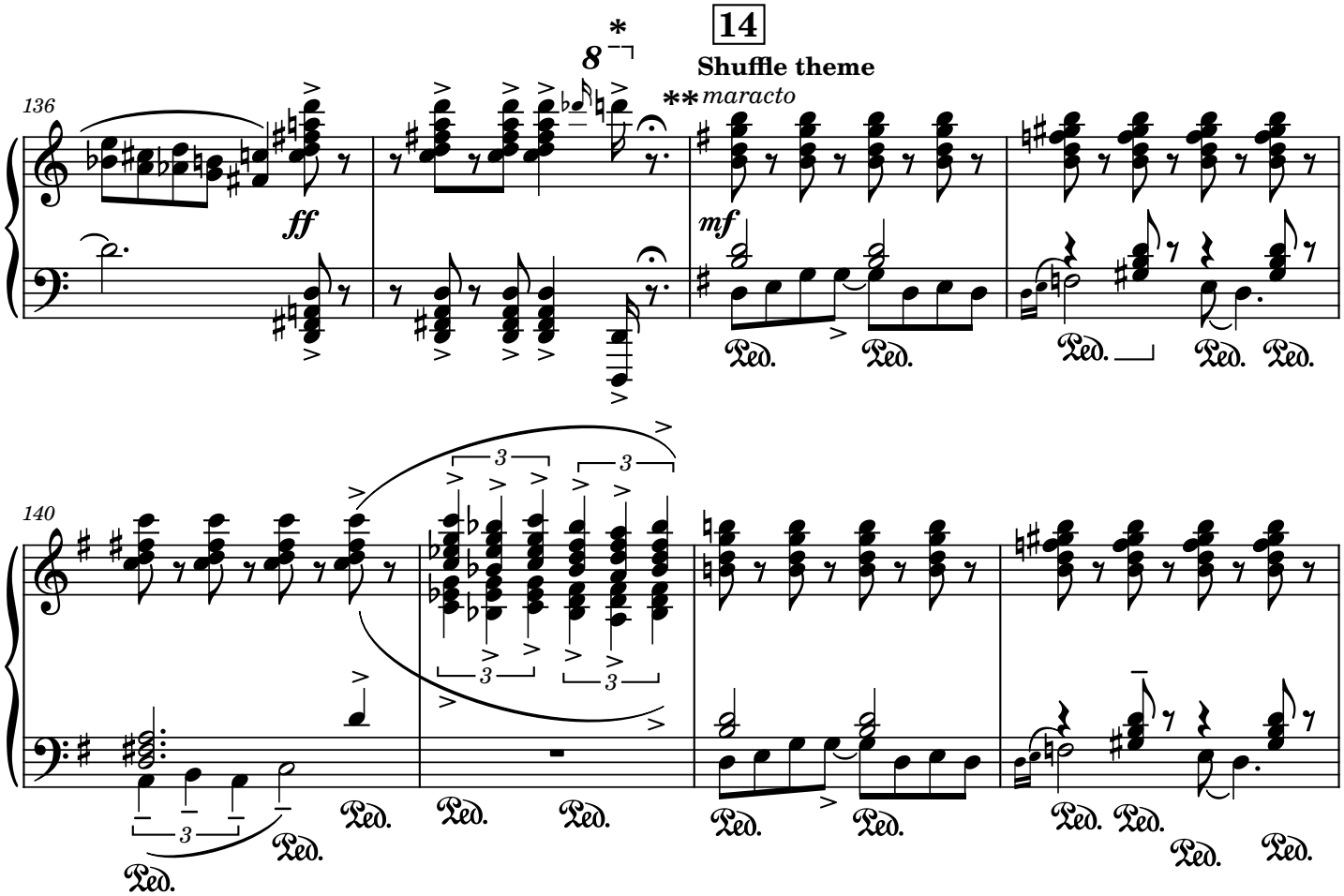
13



12(MS)

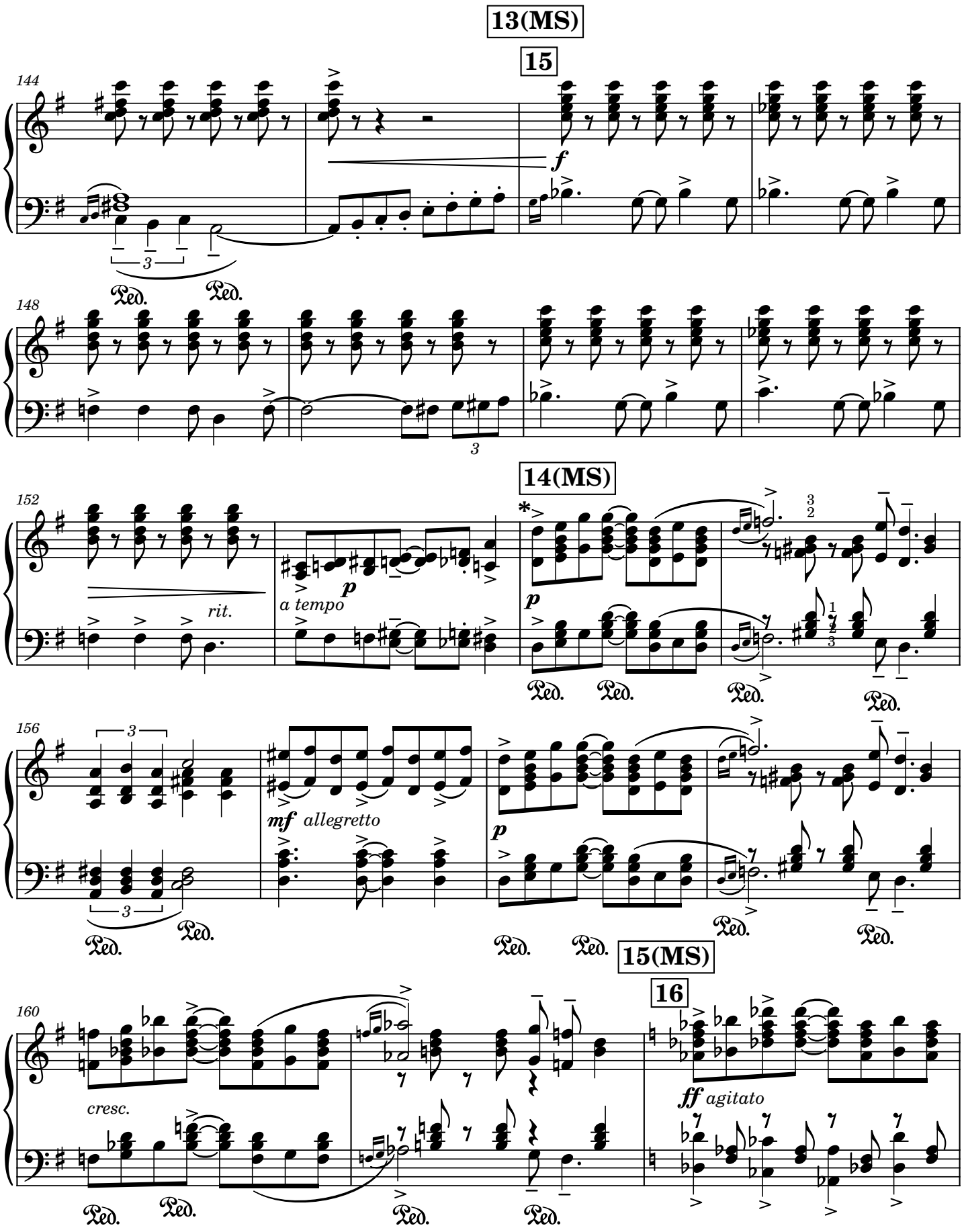
14

Shuffle theme

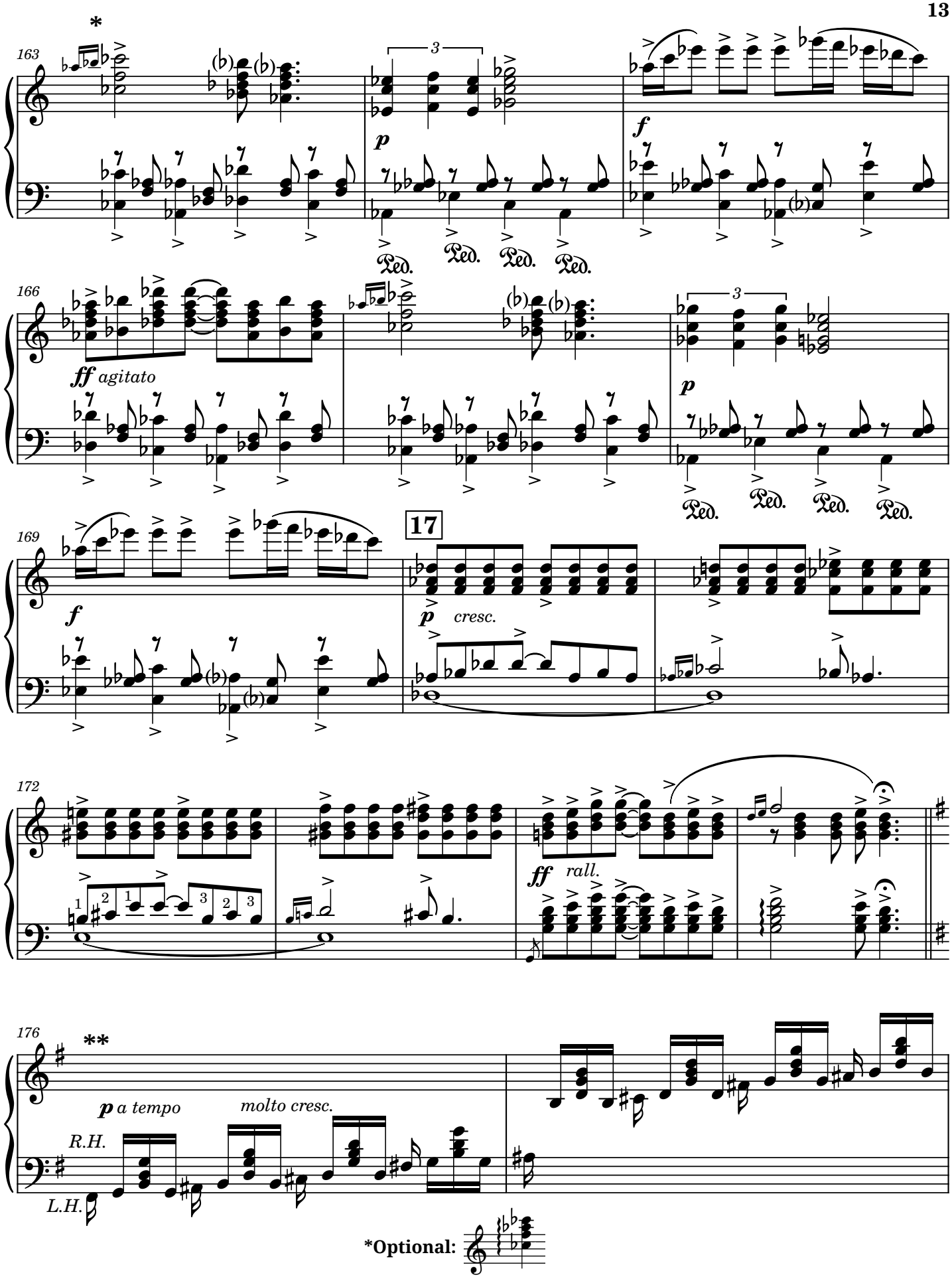


*A nod to Gershwin's piano rolls.

**As in original manuscript.



*Accents are Gershwin's.



*Optional:

**This version appears in original orchestrated manuscript. In solo piano manuscript, it appears found in first published edition.

16(MS)

18

178

180

182

loco

rit.

ff

mf

(sost.)

185

L.H.

pp

mp

19

* slower and marked

187

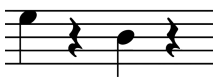
L.H.

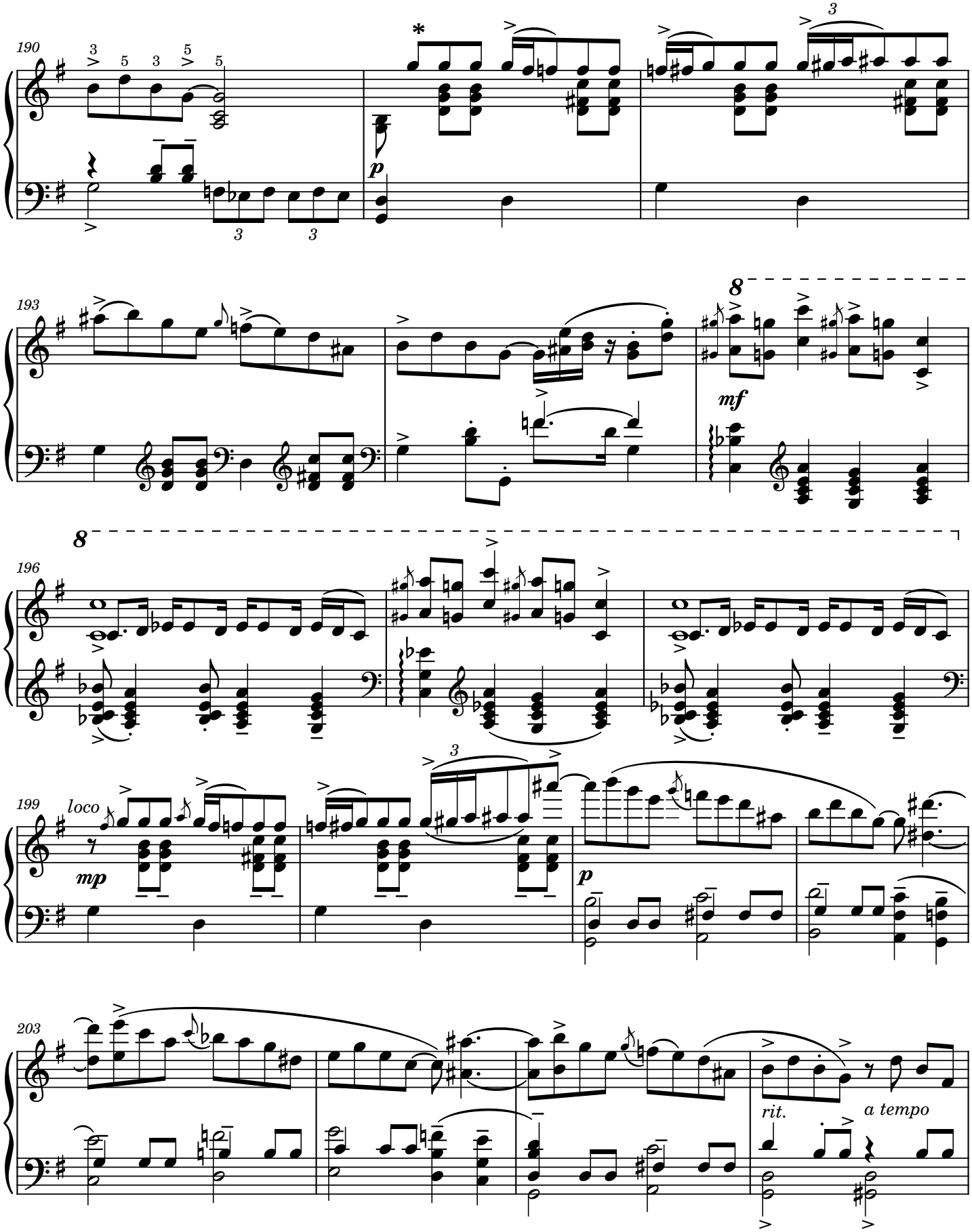
L.H.

**

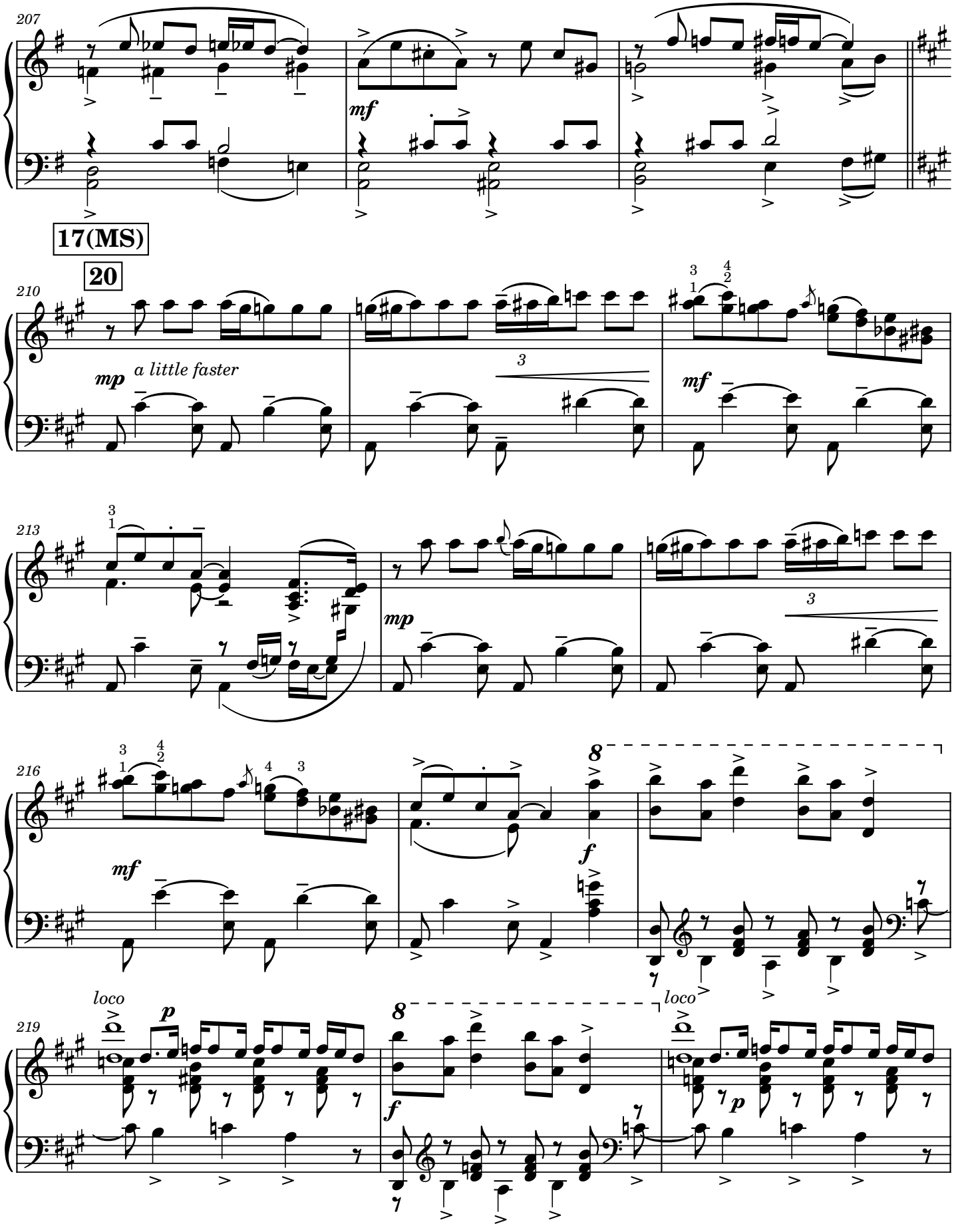
*Phrasing and accents (>) in this section are Gershwin's

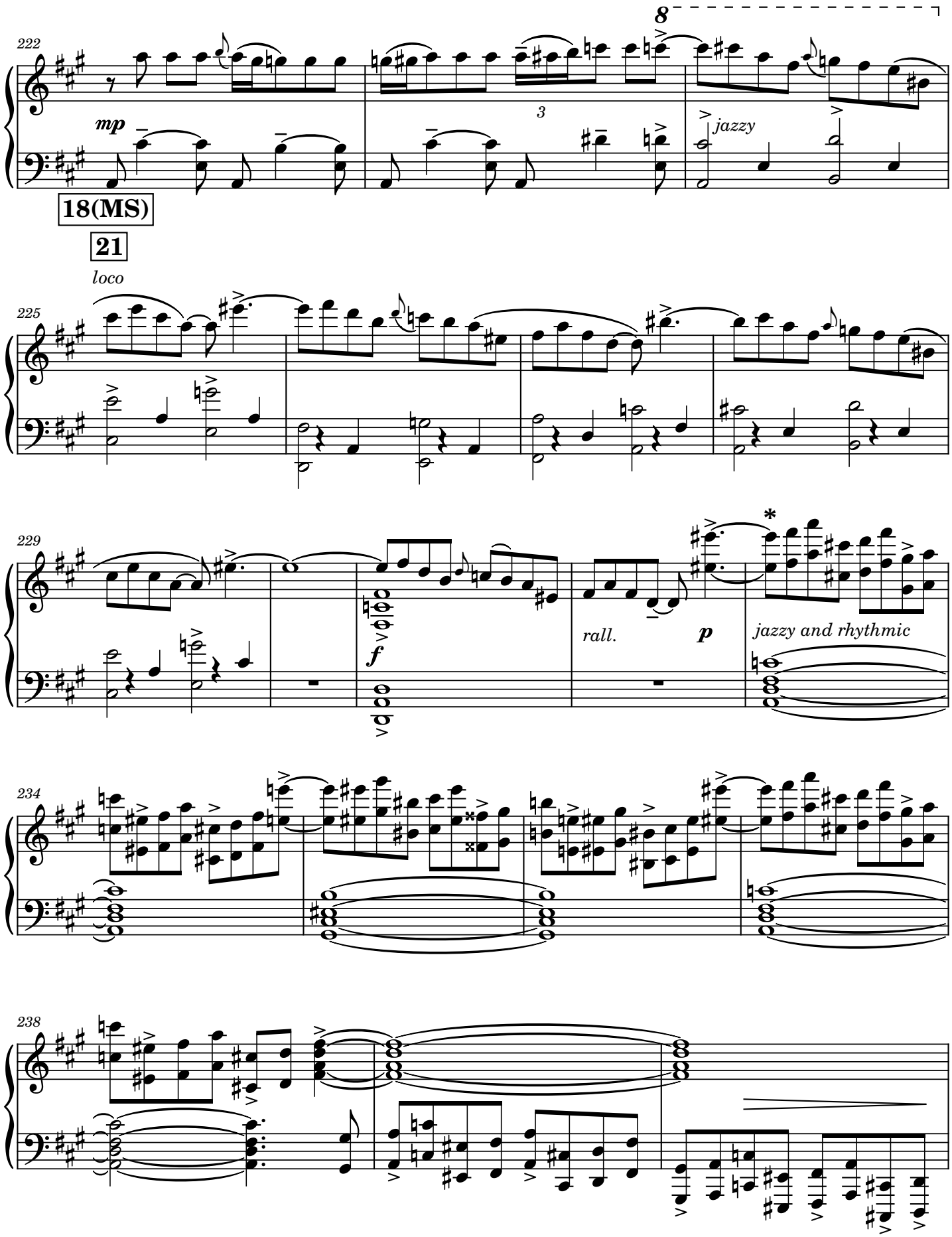
**Undoubtedly intended:



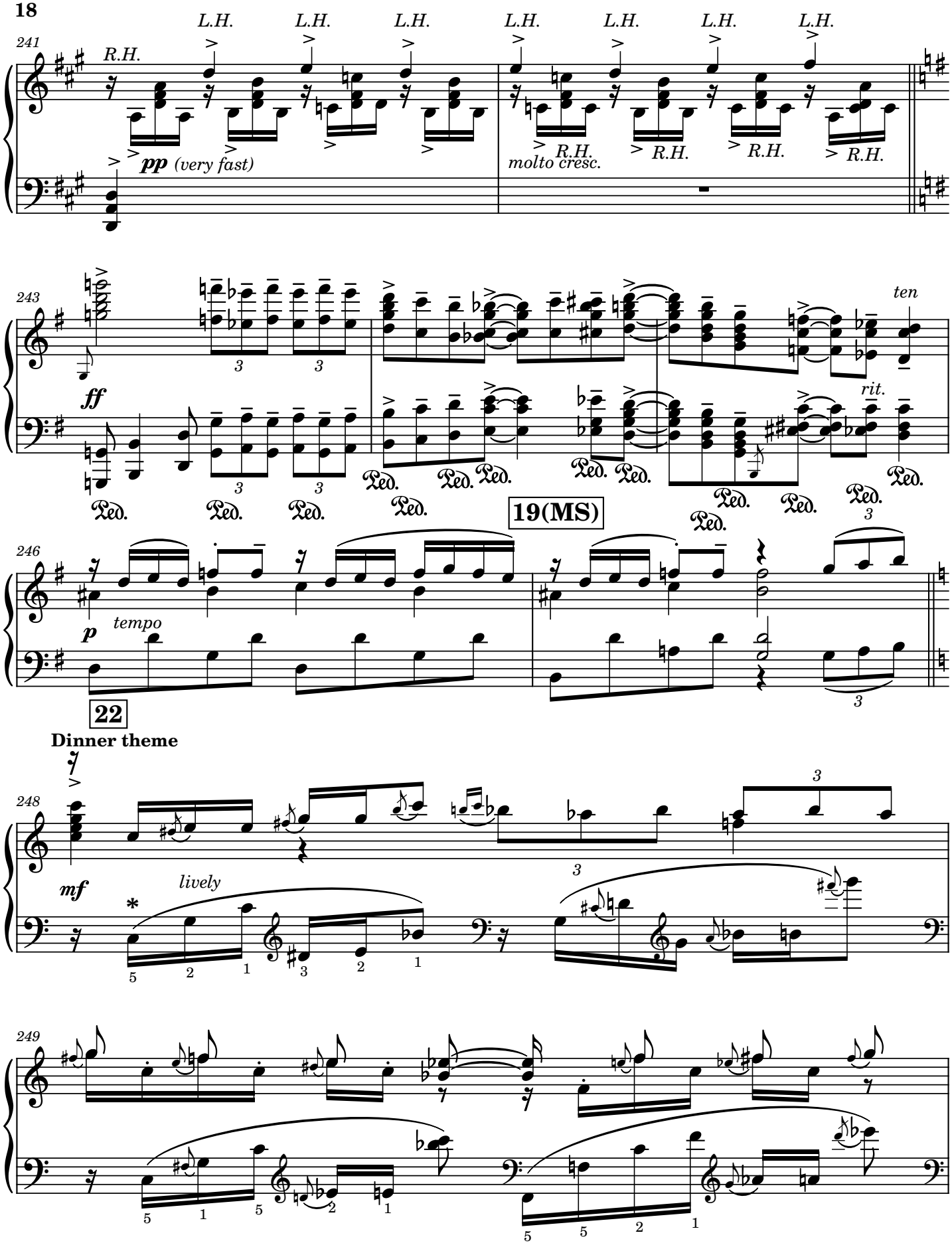


*No graces notes are indicated here in manuscript.

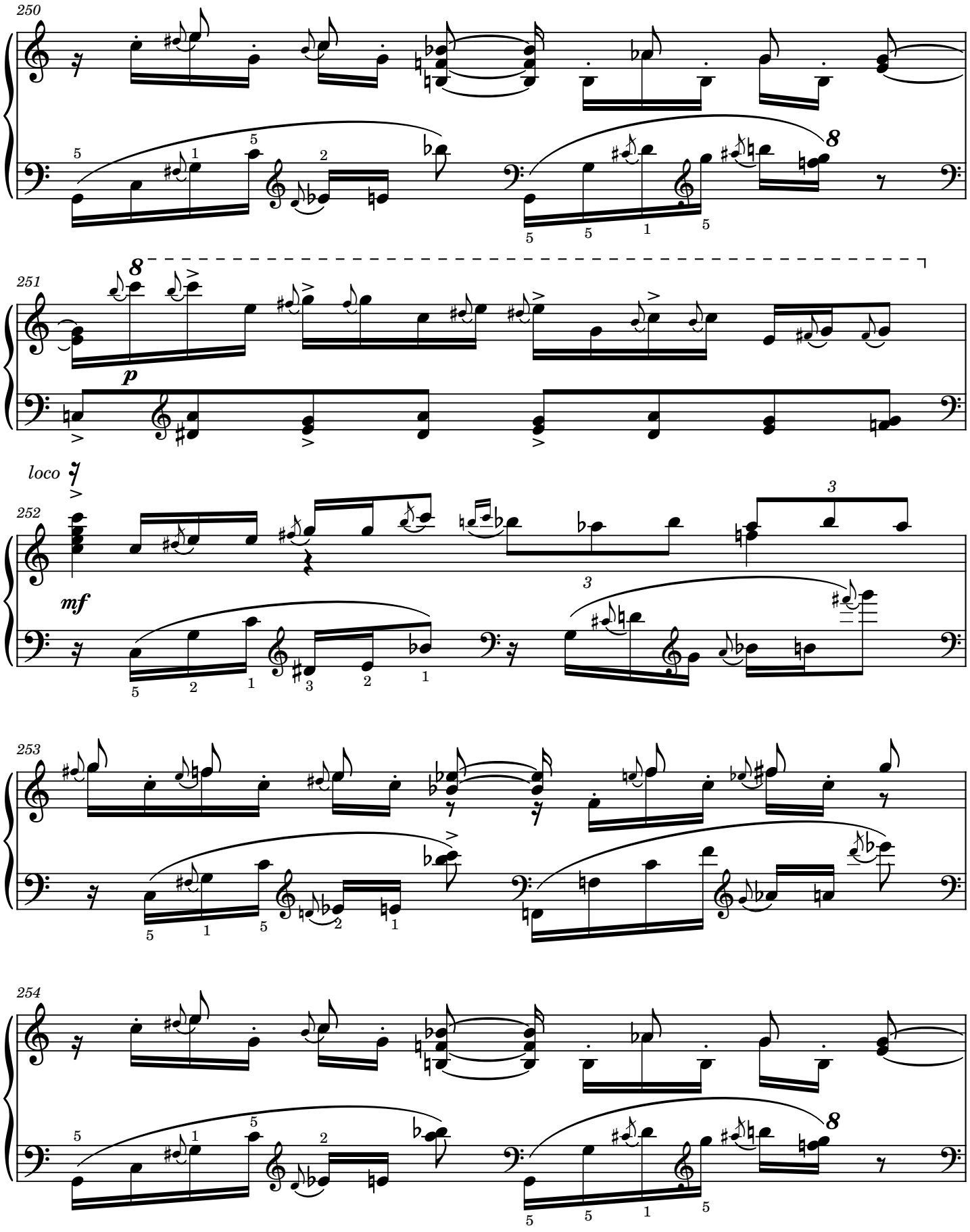

207
mf
17(MS)
20
210
mp
a little faster
3
mf
213
mp
3
216
mf
f
8
219
loco
p
8
f
loco
p

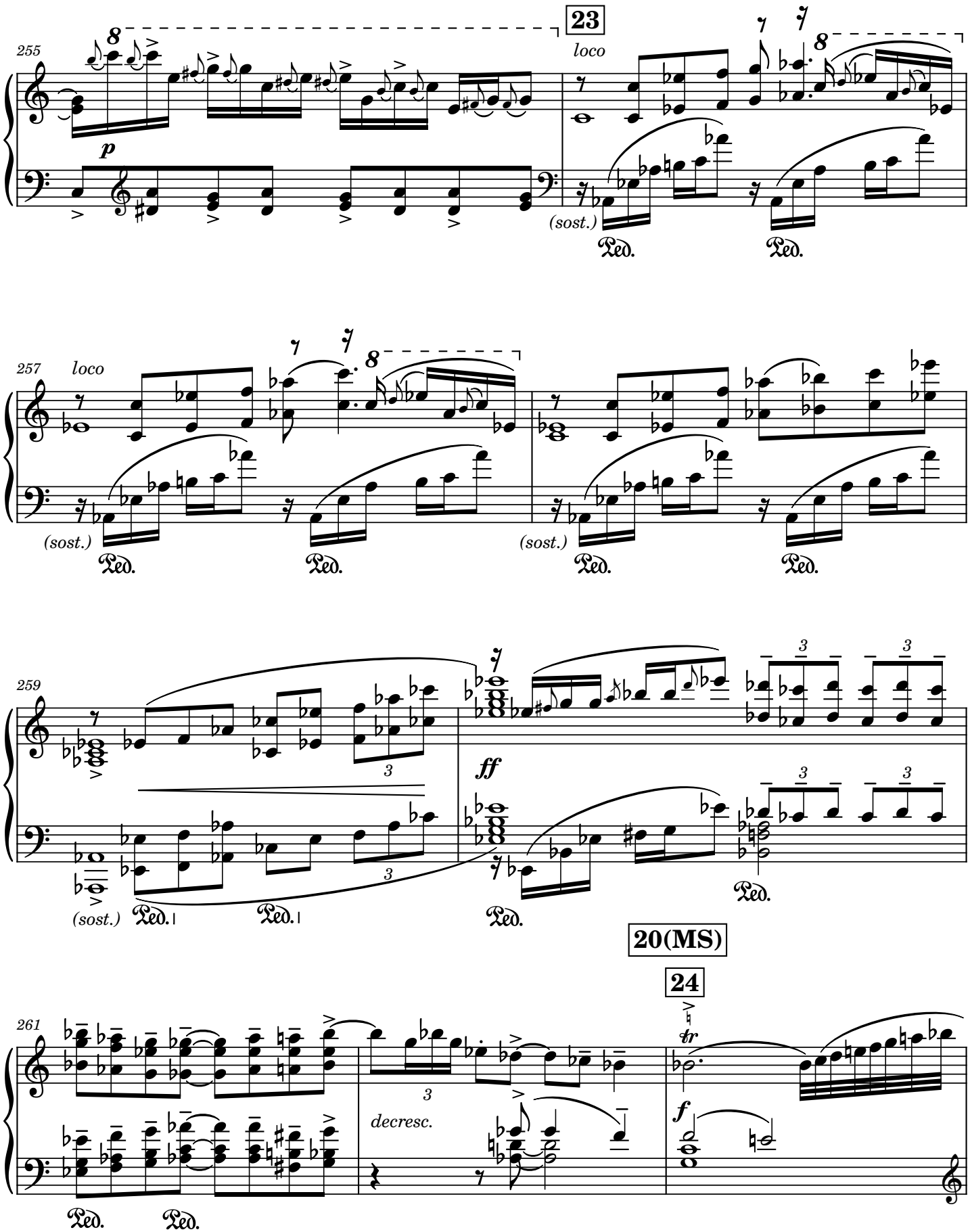


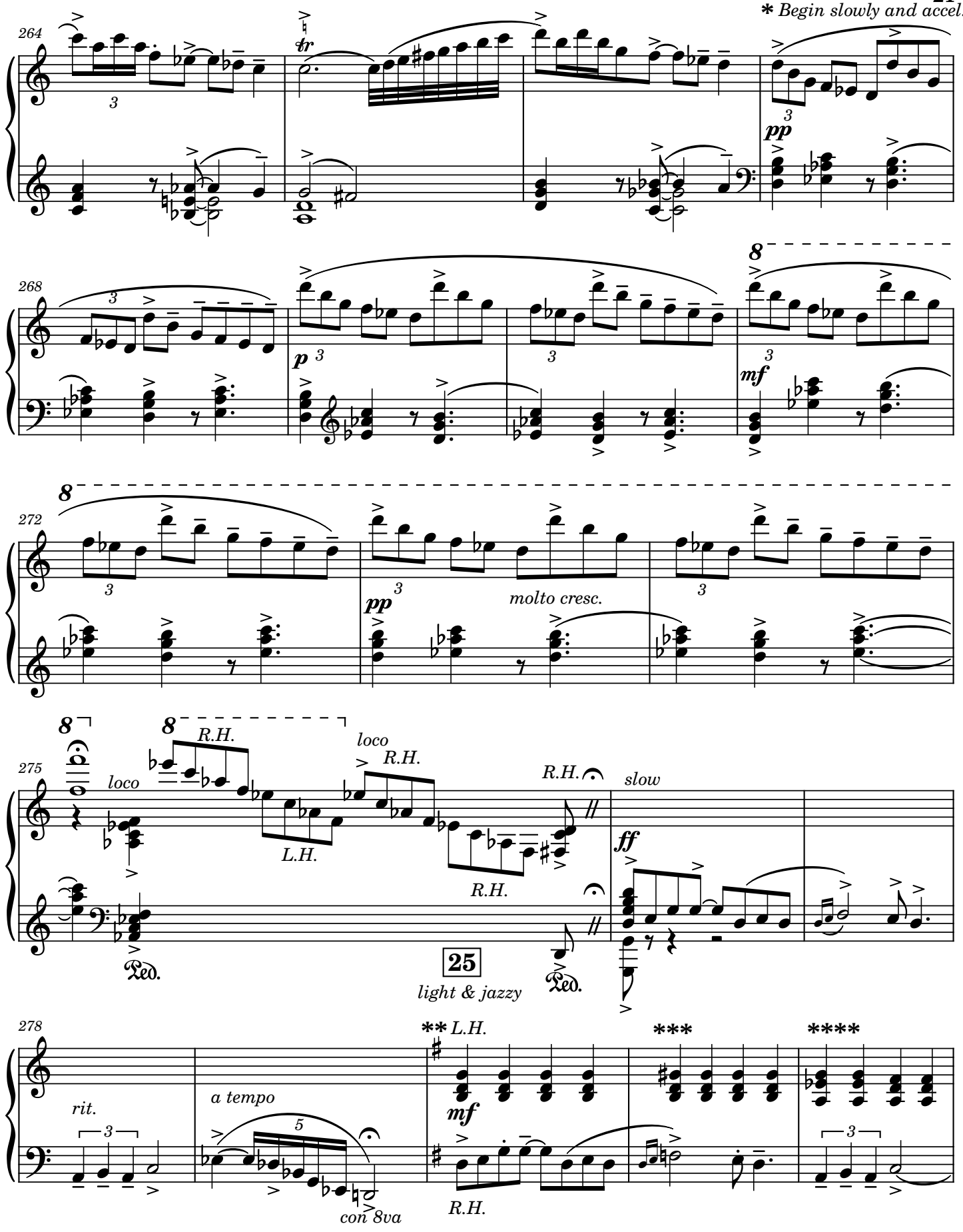
***Measures 233-242 have been reinserted. They appear in both the original piano manuscript and original orchestrated manuscript.**



*Suggested fingering is optional.


250
8
251
p
loco
252
mf
3
253
254
8


23
255
loco
p
(sost.)
Ped.
257
loco
(sost.)
259
ff
(sost.)
20(MS)
24
261
decresc.
tr
f

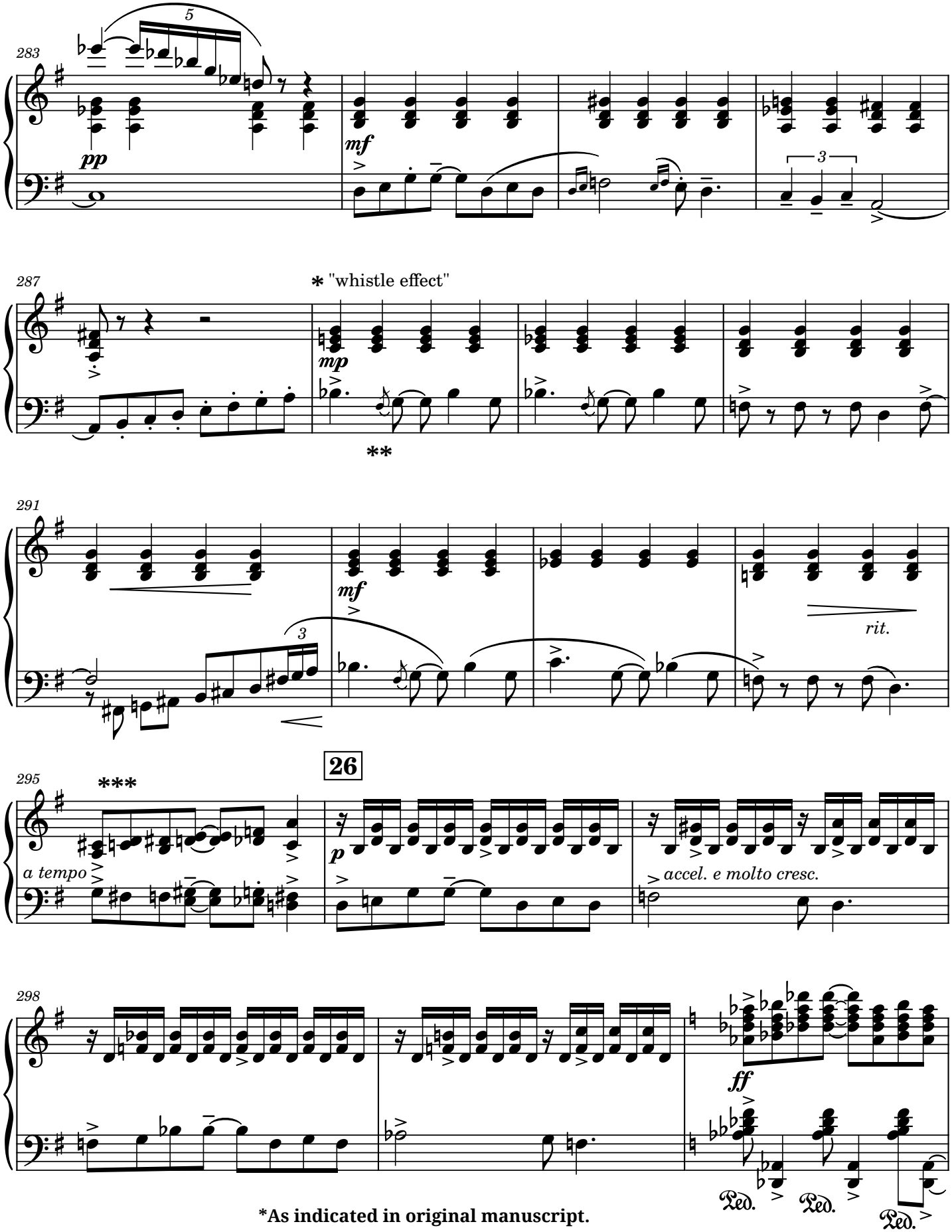


*As indicated in original manuscript.

**Crossed hands as indicated in original manuscript, and chords are written as quarter notes, not eighth notes.

***No F is indicated in manuscript in these chords.

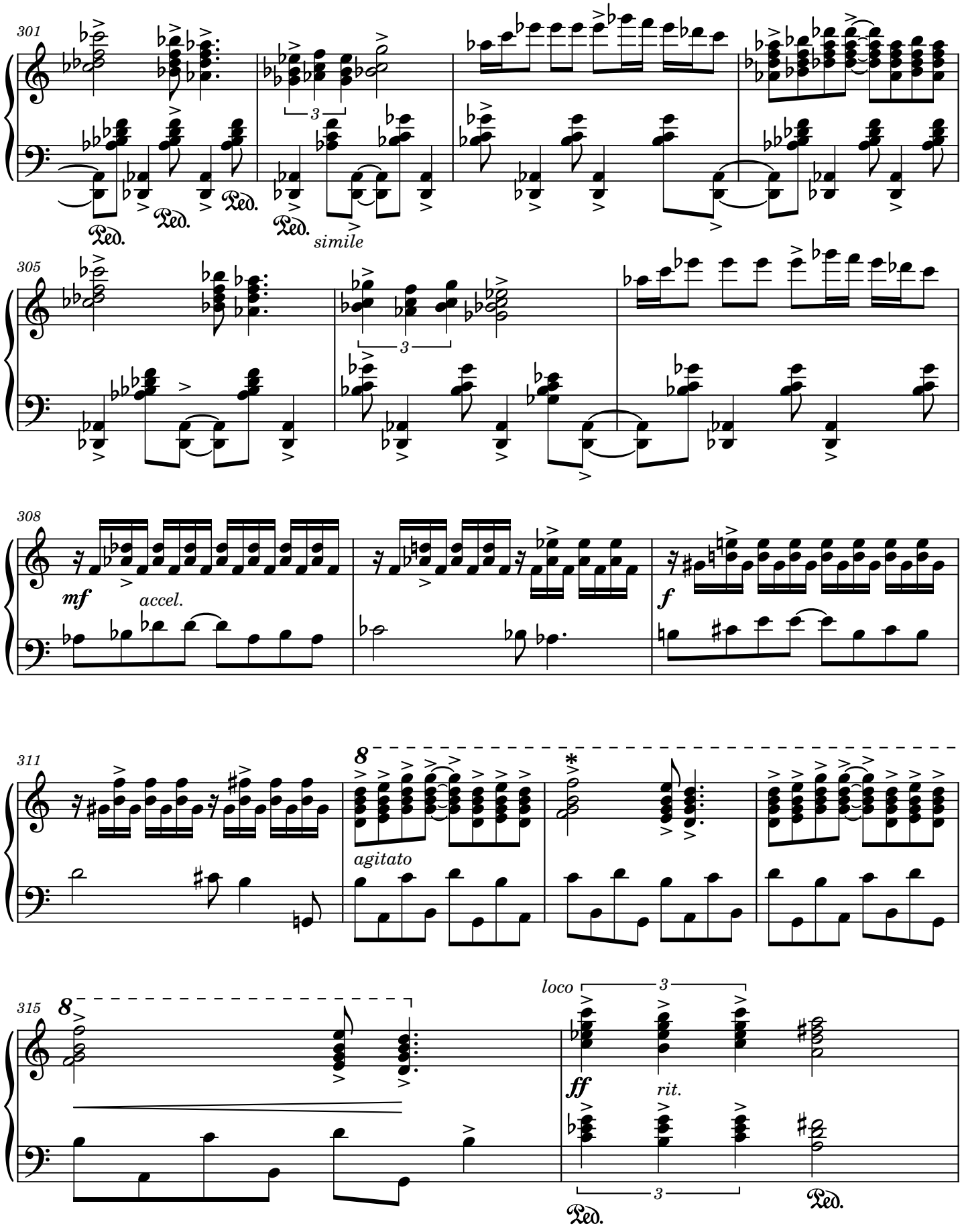
****No C is indicated in manuscript in these chords.



*As indicated in original manuscript.

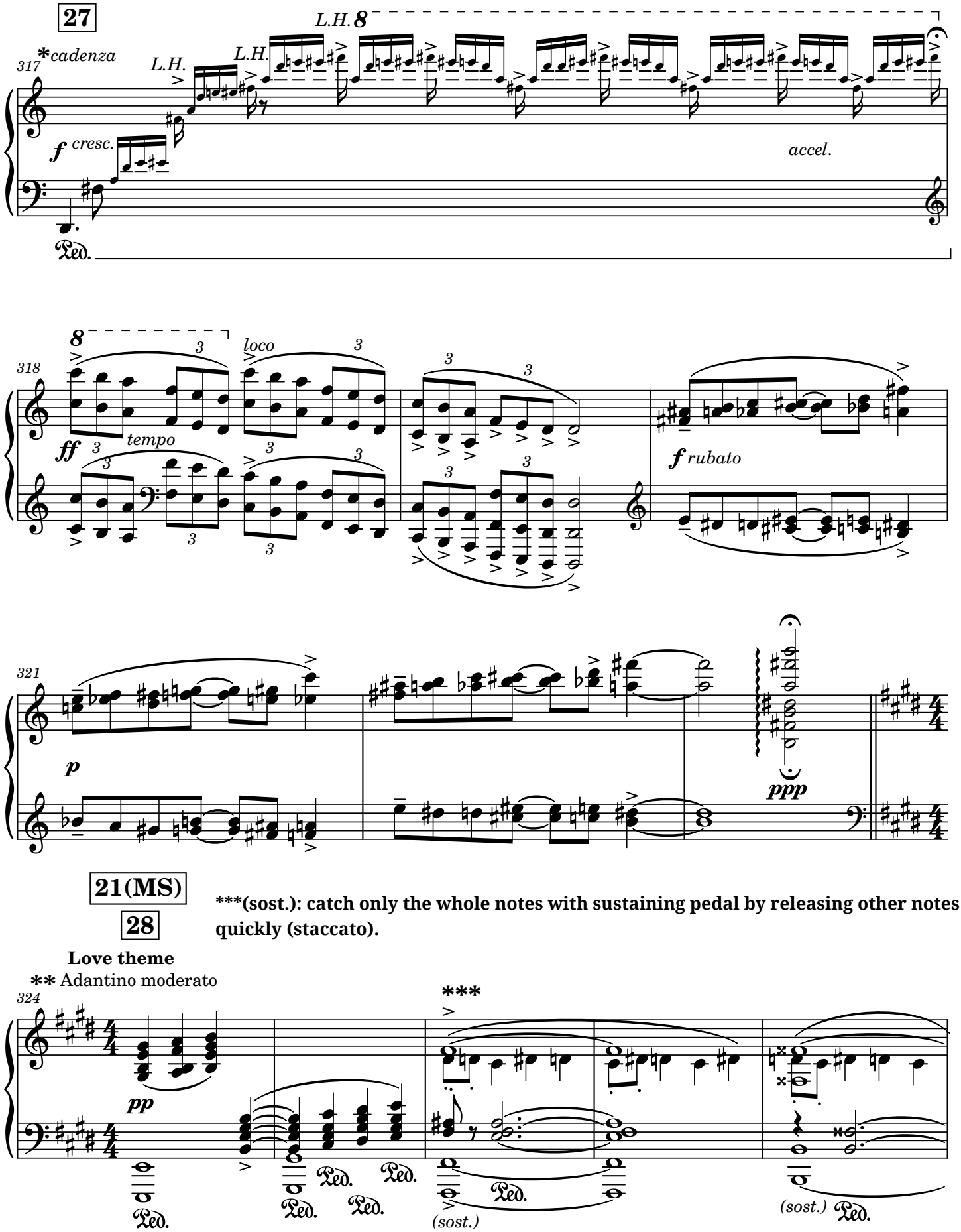
**Grace notes do not appear in original manuscript.

***In both original manuscripts (orchestra and piano, and piano solo), this measure is indicated one octave higher. Also, no rit. or fermatas are indicated.



***In both original manuscripts, a "G" is written, not an "F" as the top note. But an "F" is in keeping with the melodic structure.**

*In the original manuscript, there is no C# written, contrary to previously published editions.



21(MS)

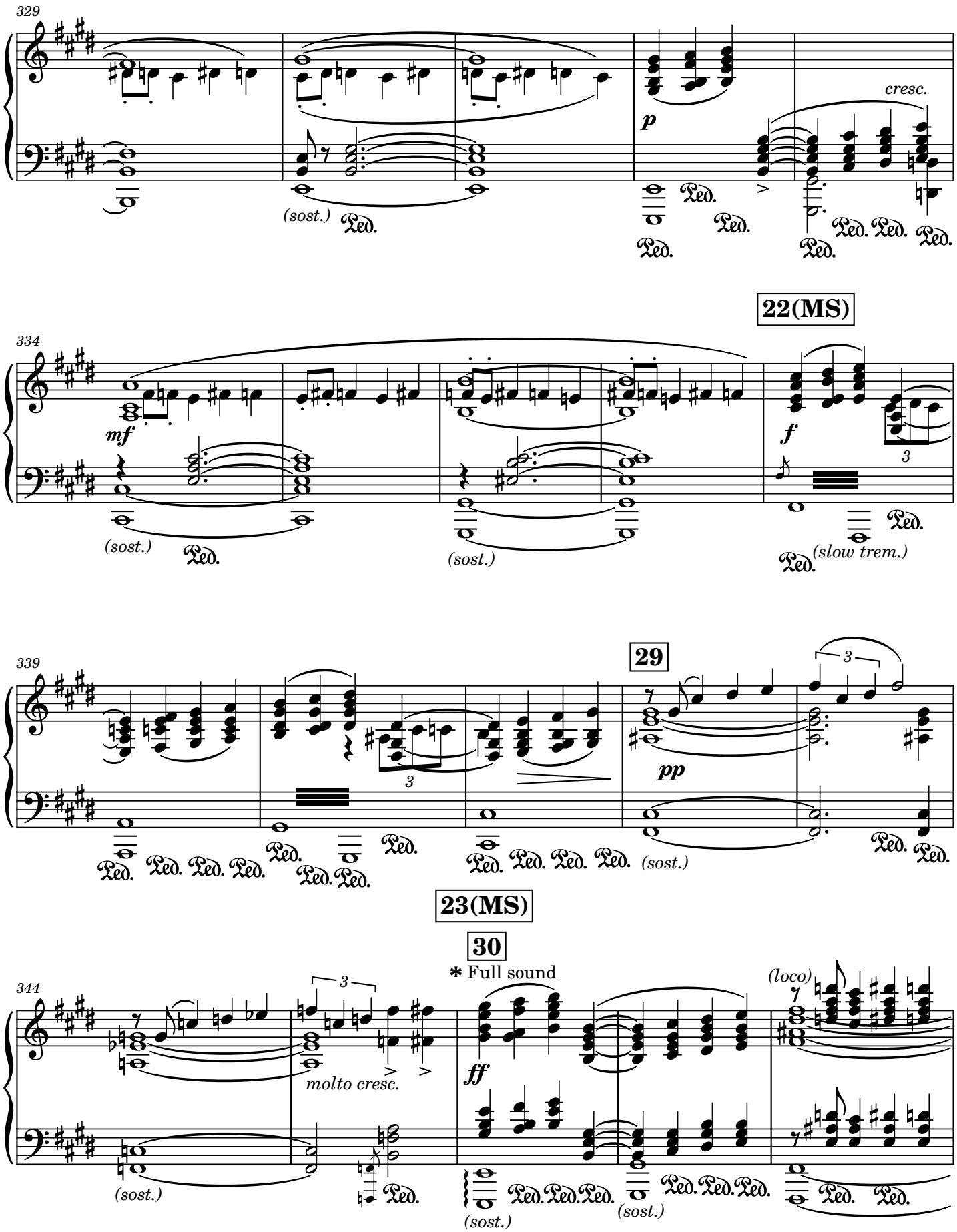
28

***(sost.): catch only the whole notes with sustaining pedal by releasing other notes quickly (staccato).

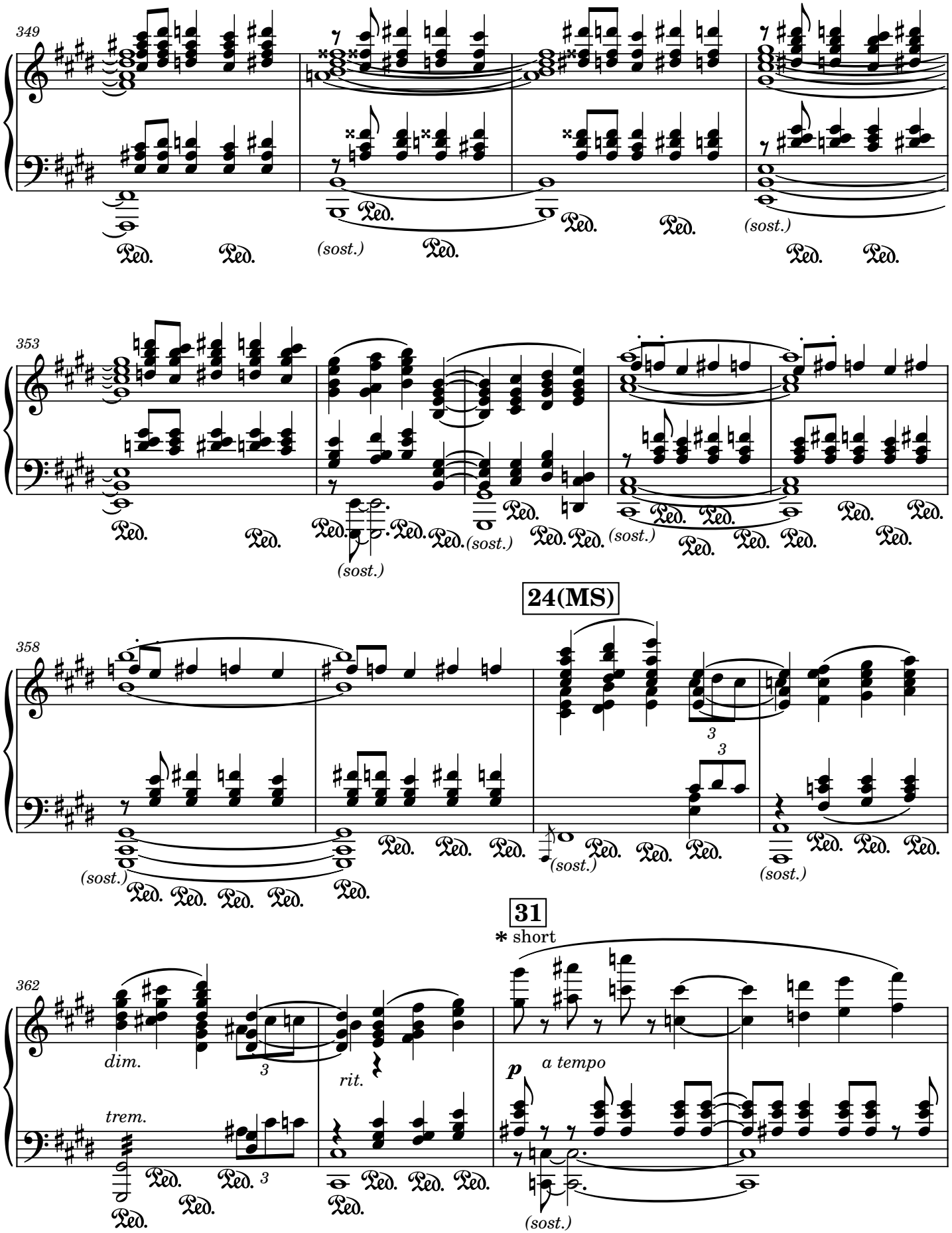
Love theme

** Adantino moderato

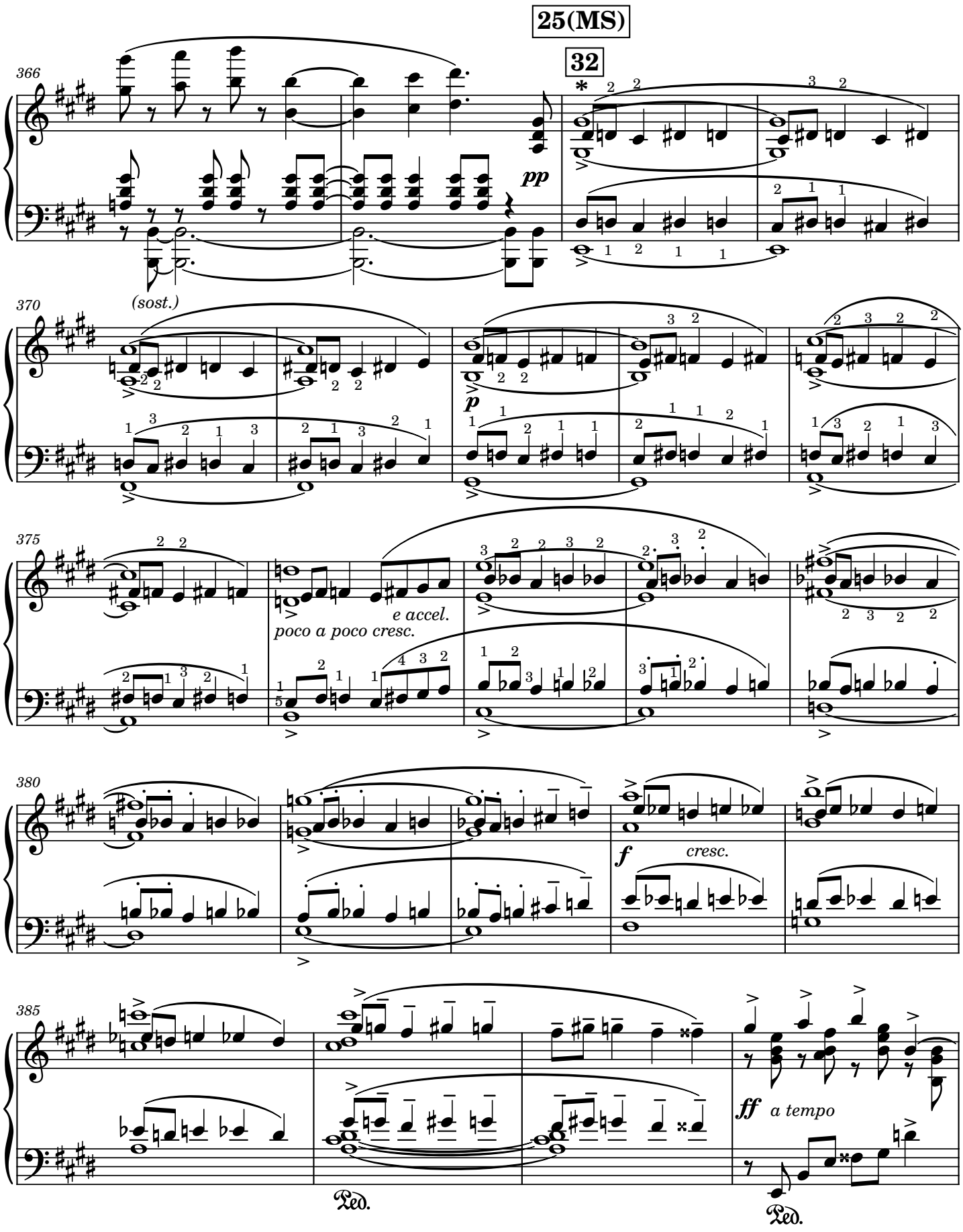
**As indicated in original manuscript. Although doubled in value, the first two measures of this new section are similar rhythmically to the three "rubato" measures that end the preceding section, indicating that Gershwin probably intended a less "dramatic" transition to this famous theme than commonly believed.



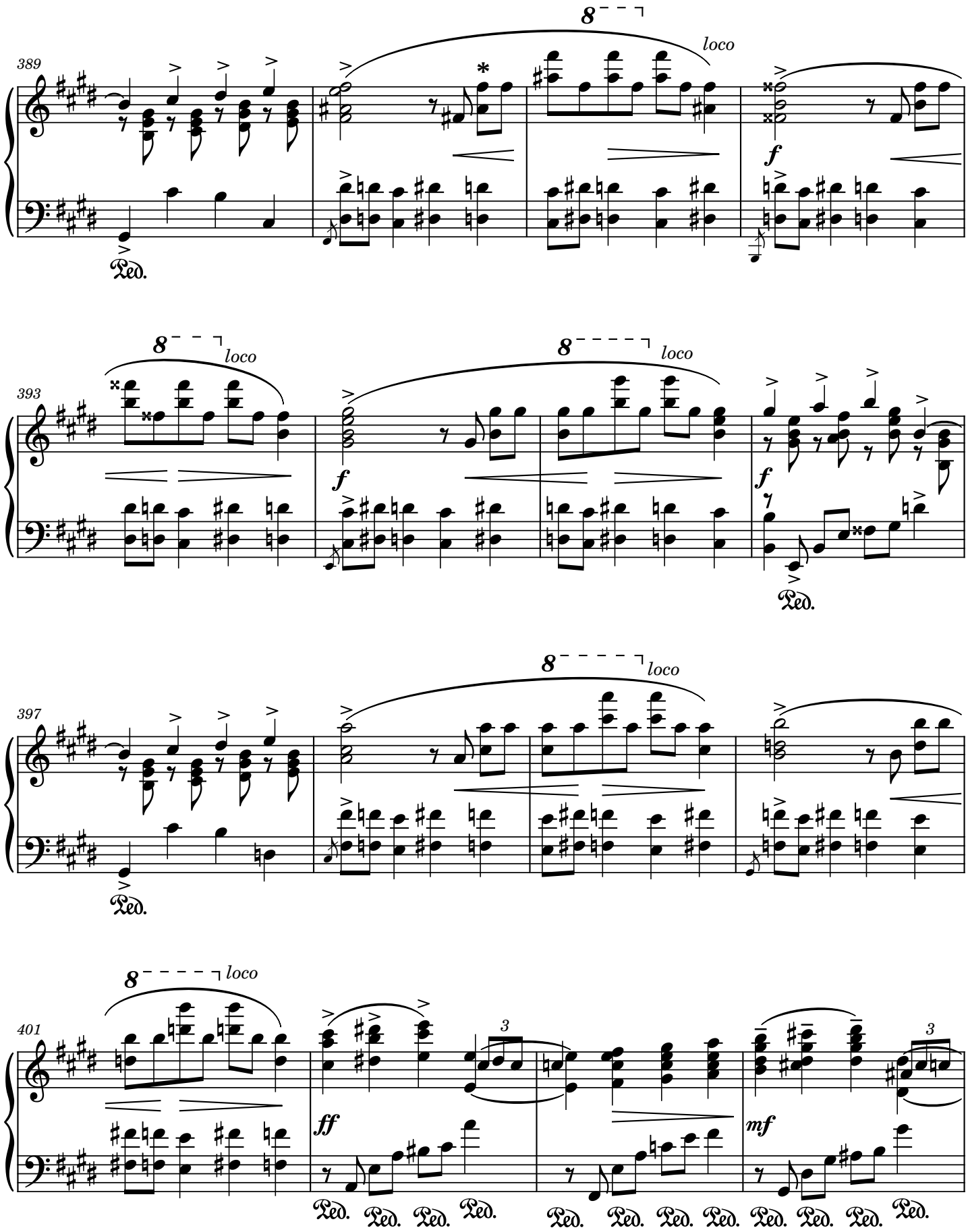
*As indicated in original manuscript.



*As indicated in original manuscript.

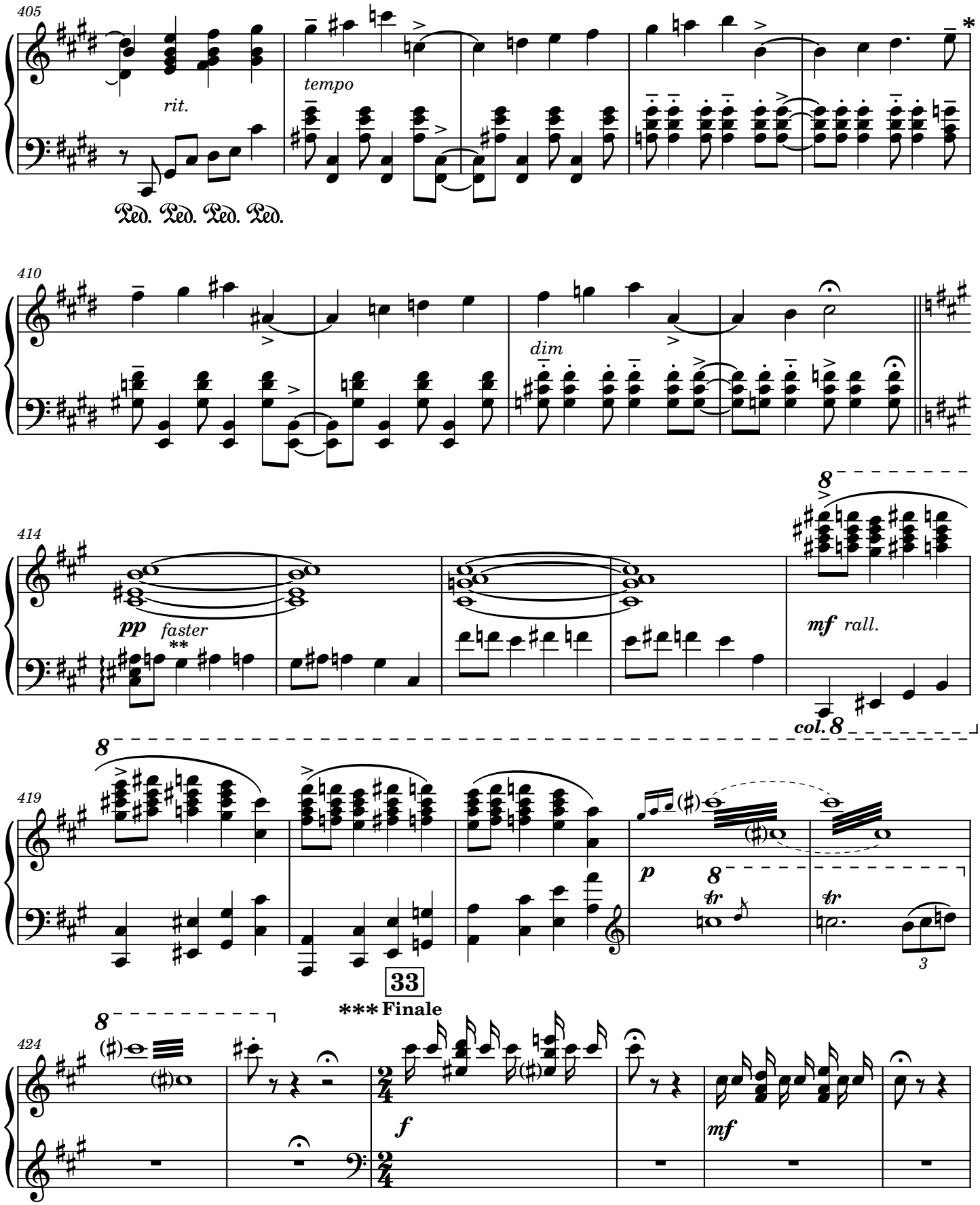


*The following 20 measures have been restored according to both manuscripts.



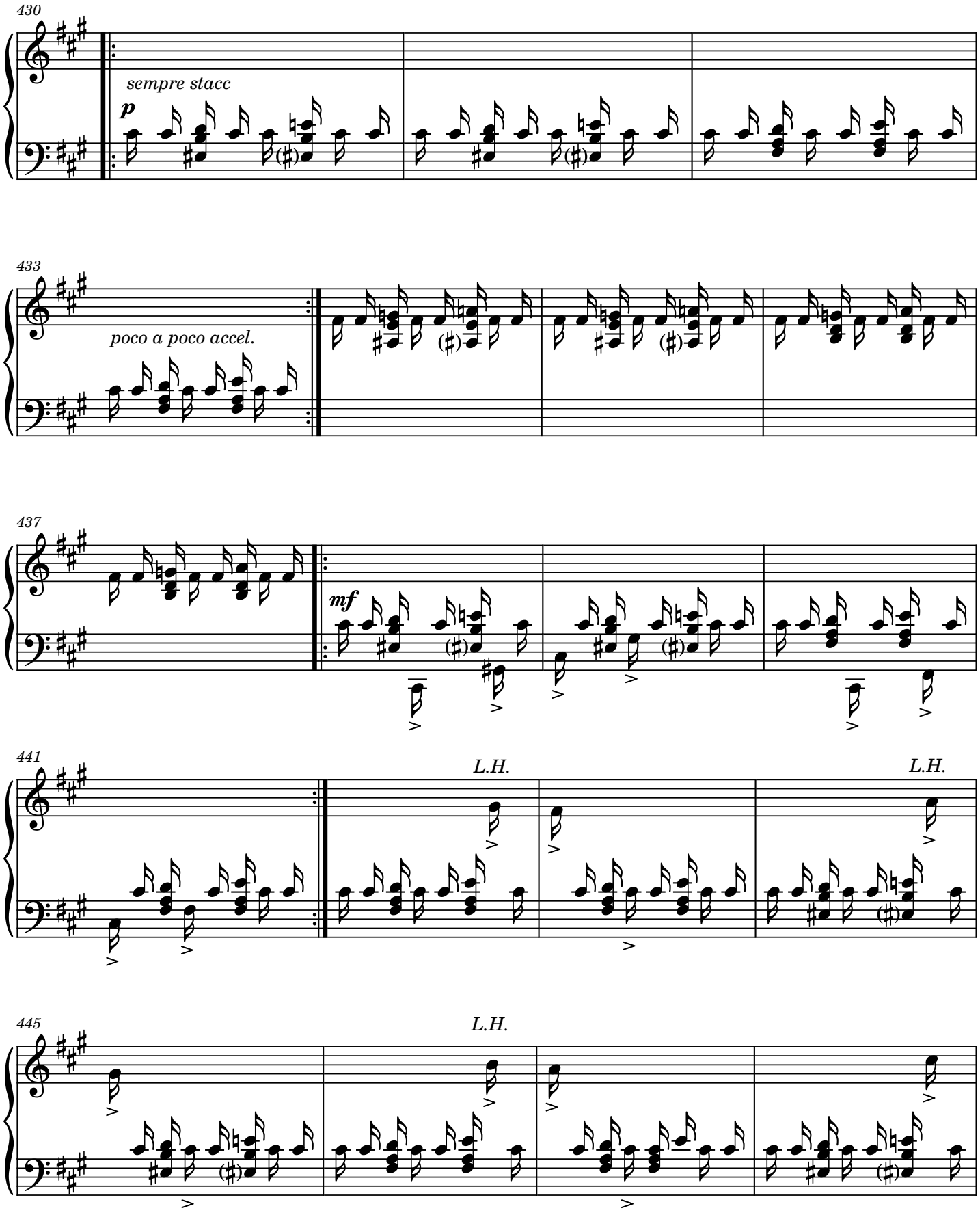
***The original manuscript is sketchy here and does not contain an "E" in this chord as is present in former editions.**

*No sixteenth notes are indicated in the right hand for the and of beat four.



**As indicated in original manuscript. Measures 414-425 appear in both manuscripts. Second system repeats one octave higher although not shown here.

***In original manuscript, sixteenth notes are written separately (not beamed), an intentional device by Gershwin to insure separation between notes (almost stacc.). "Finale" is Gershwin's only directive.


430
sempre stacc
p
433
poco a poco accel.
437
mf
441
L.H.
L.H.
445
L.H.

449

453

f

dim. e rall.

458

***pp** short and rhythmic*

463

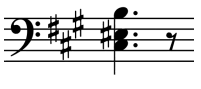
sfz

ff

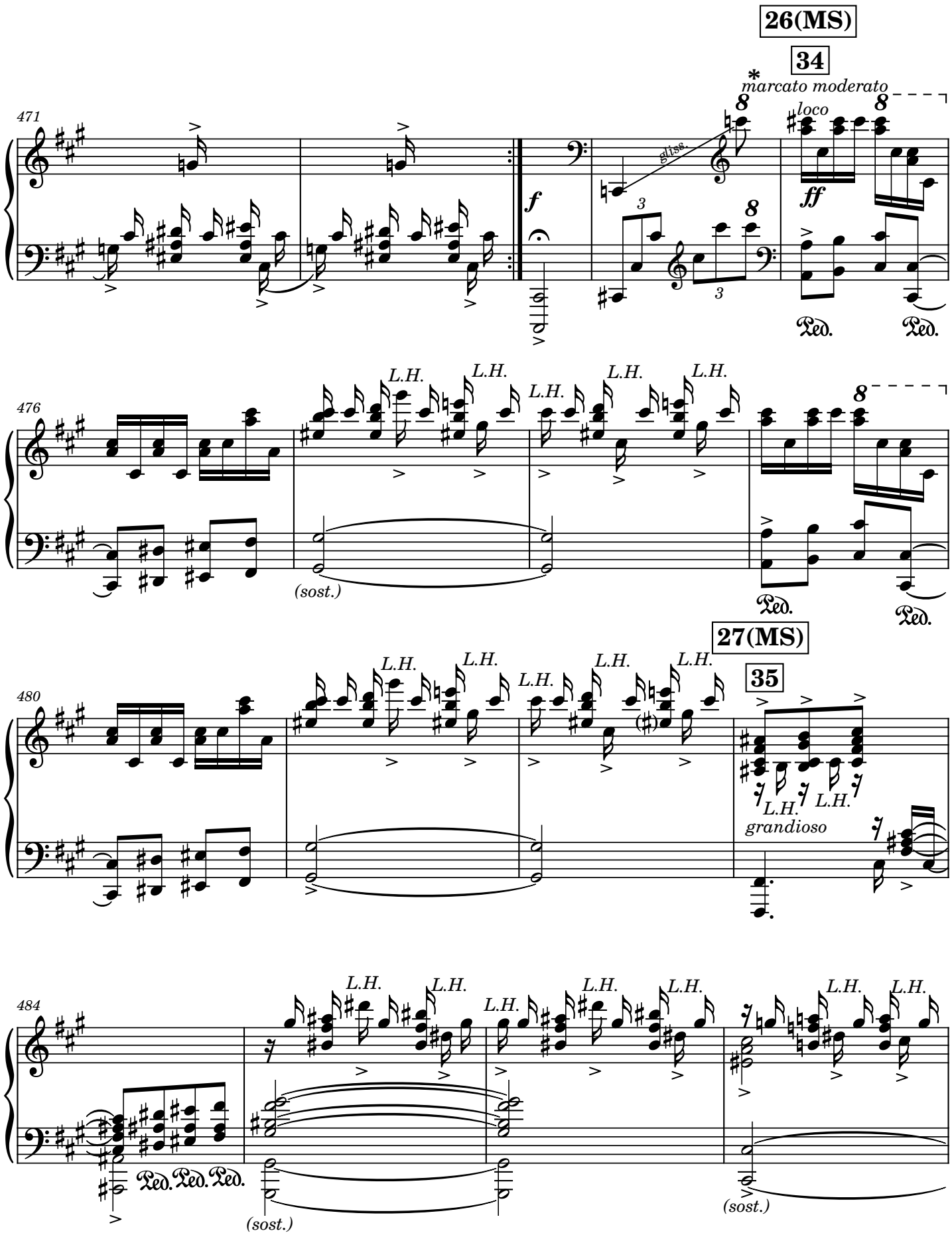
467

***Ossia: do not tie B.**

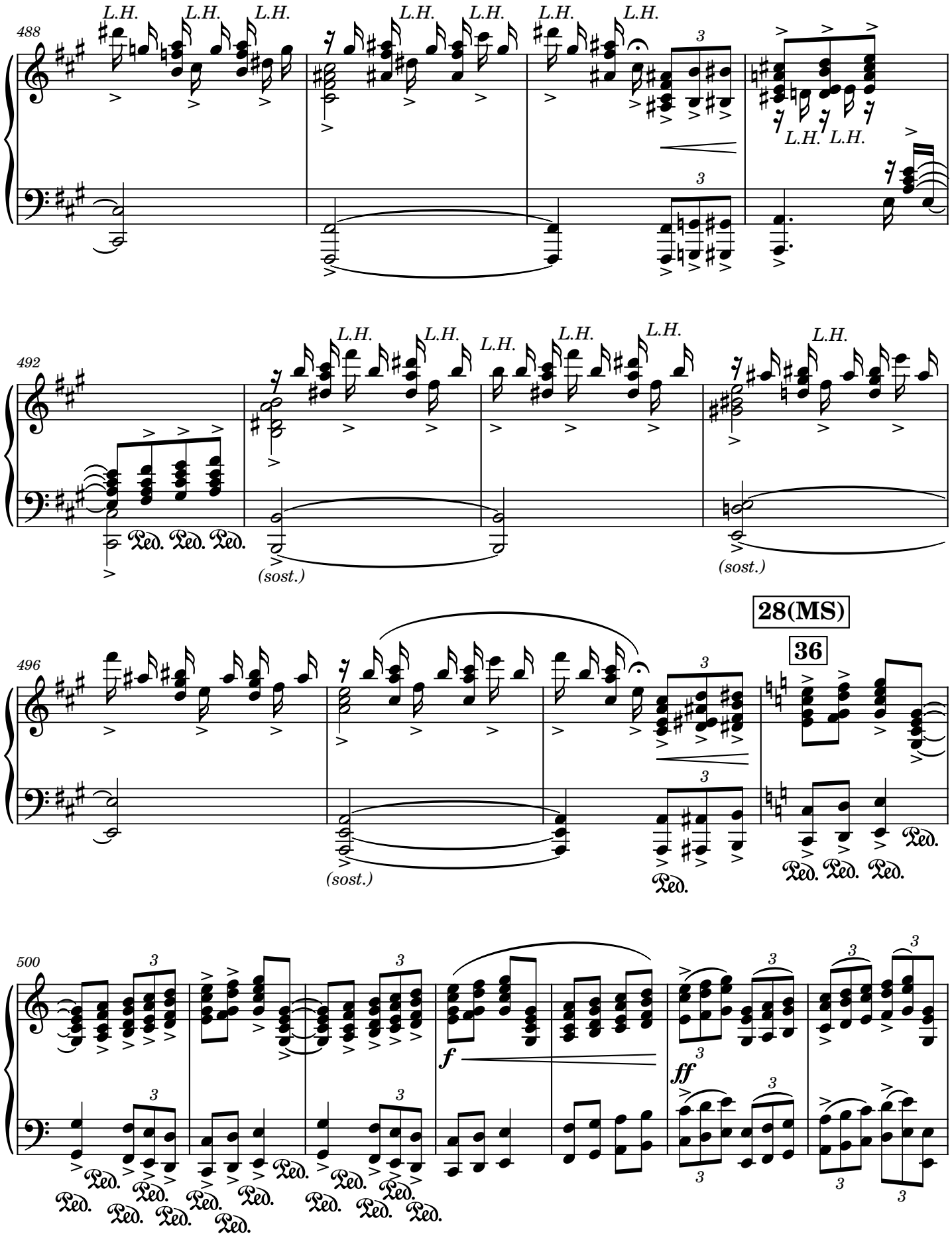
****In original manuscript, the C# octave is marked "tremolo", followed by an additional measure:**

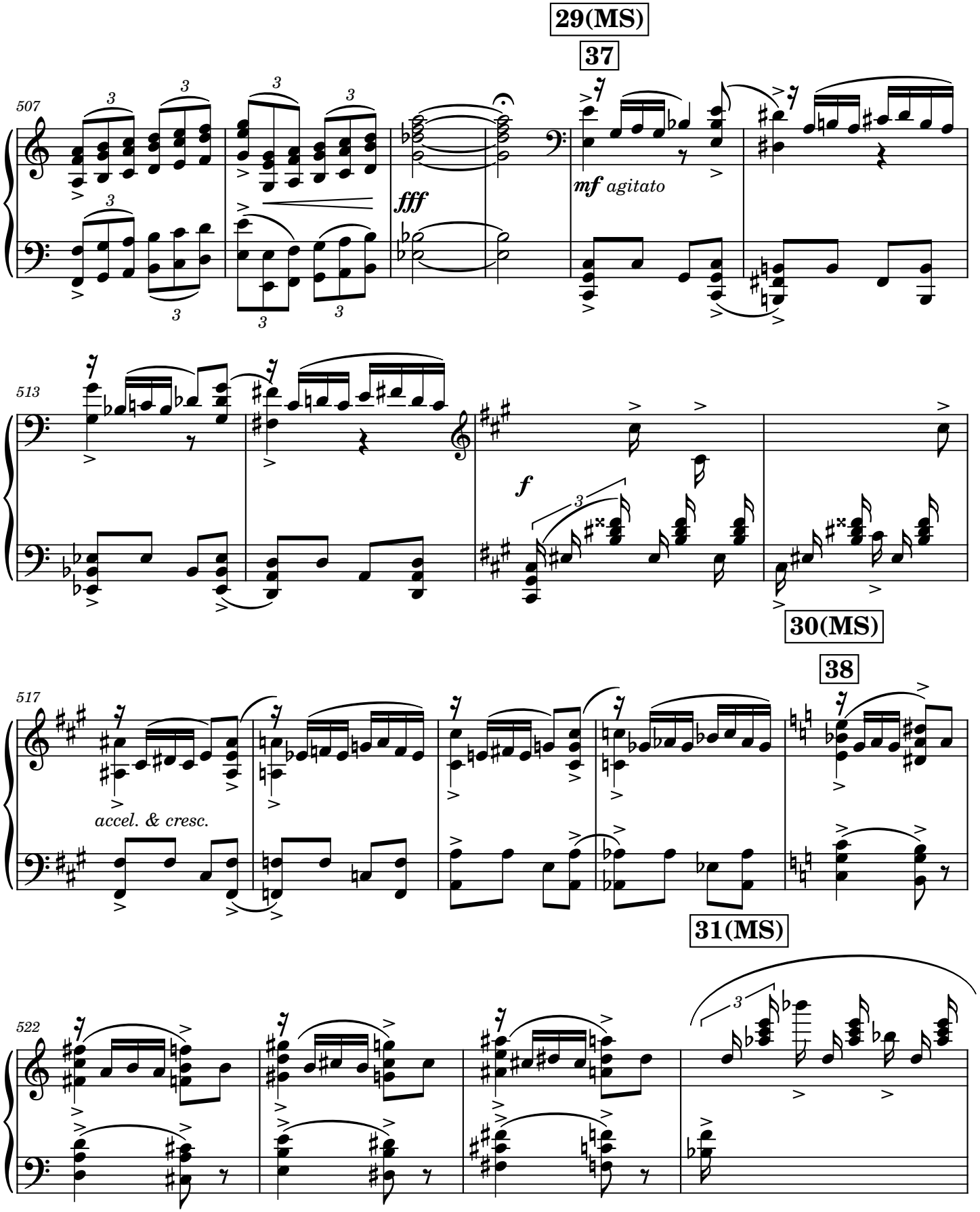


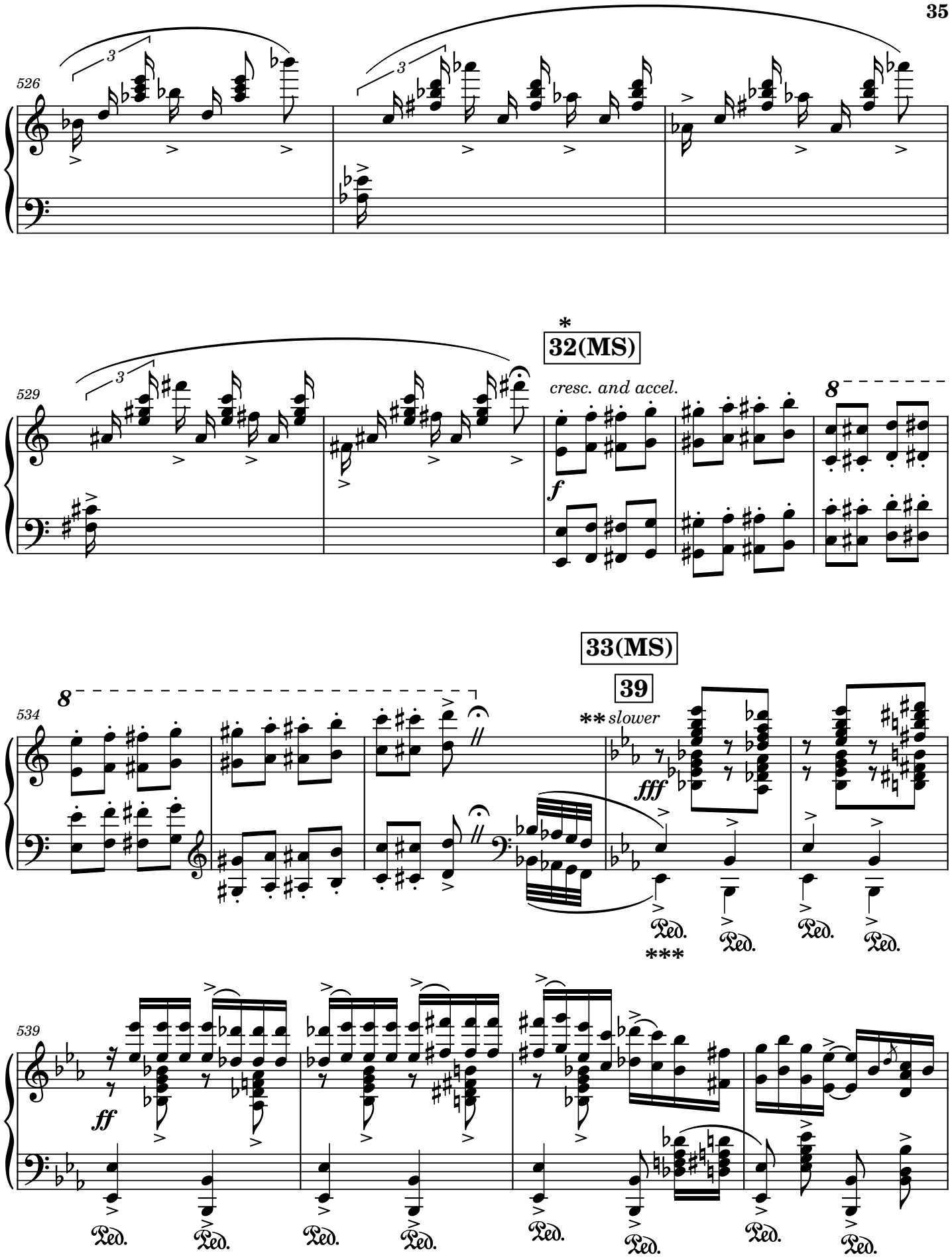
This can be included at the discretion of the performer.



*As in original manuscript.

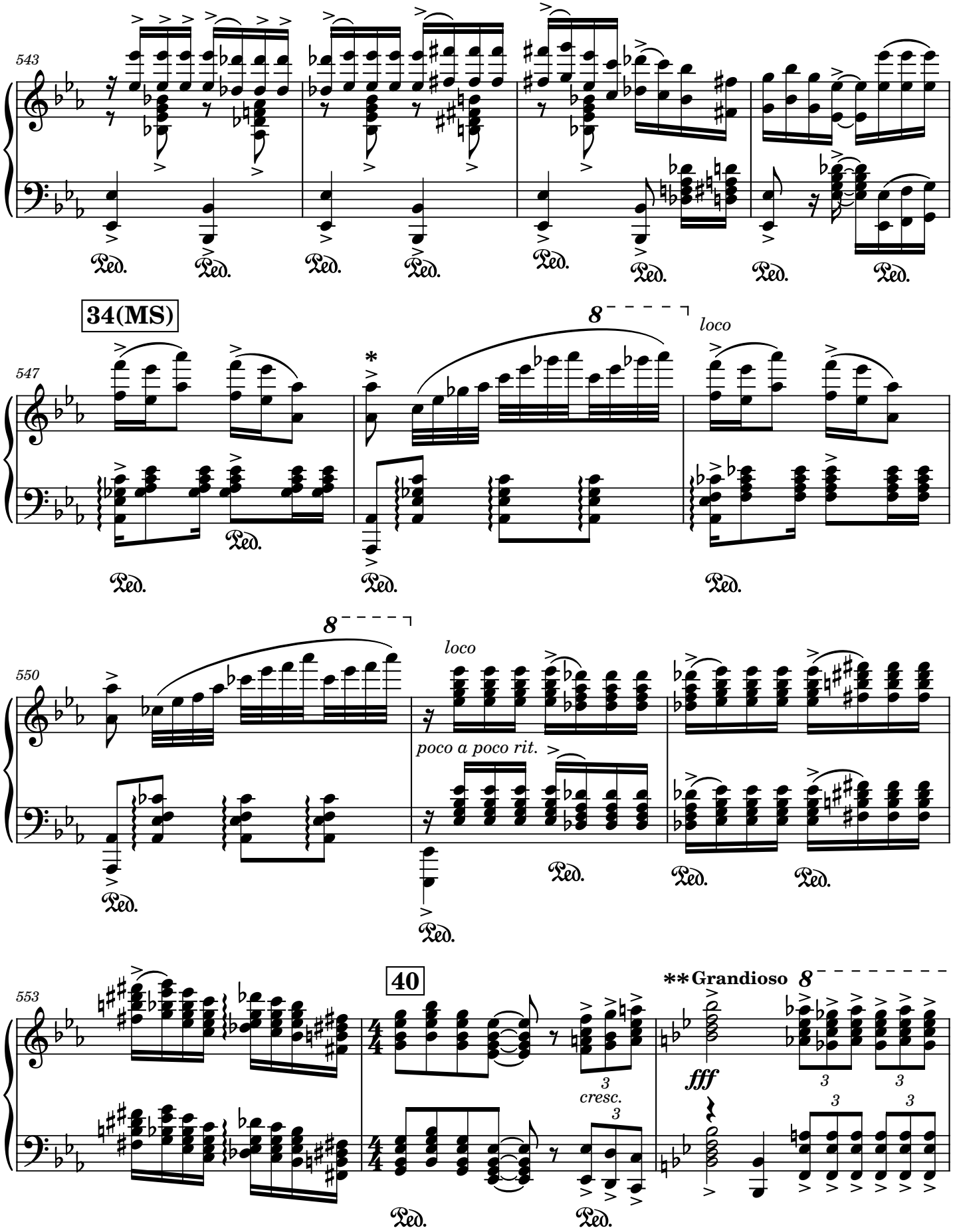

488
L.H.
492
(sost.)
Ped.
496
28(MS)
36
500
f
ff


29(MS)
37
507
fff
mf agitato
513
f
30(MS)
38
517
accel. & cresc.
31(MS)
522



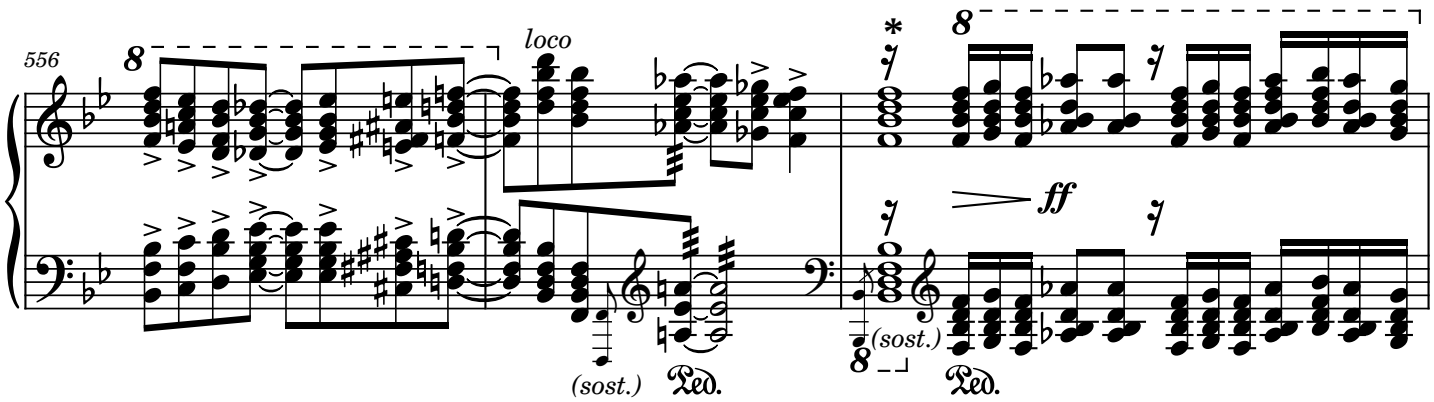
*The information that was supposed to go here is too large to fit onto this page. Please forward yourself to page 38.

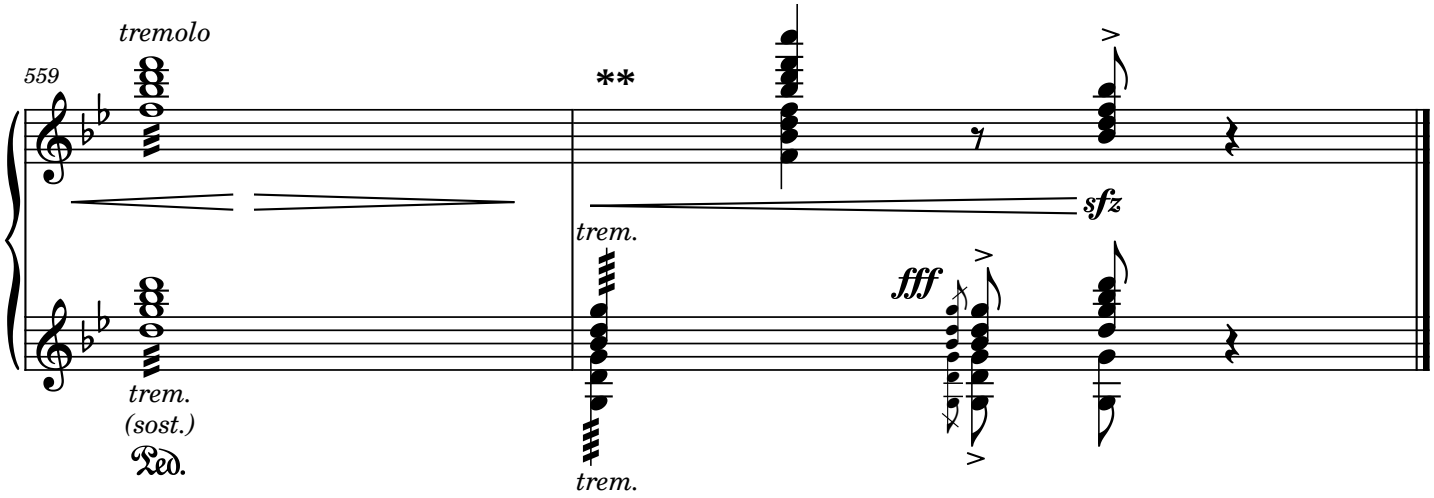
**As indicated in original manuscript. ***Please forward yourself to page 38.



*The downbeat is only notation. No 32nd notes or arpeggiated chords are indicated. Manuscript is sketchy here.

**Original manuscript.

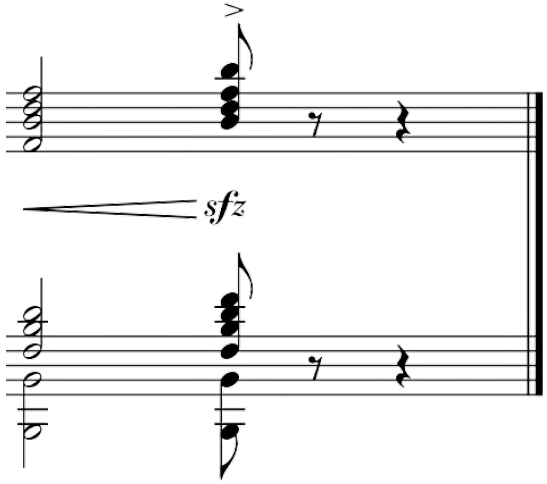




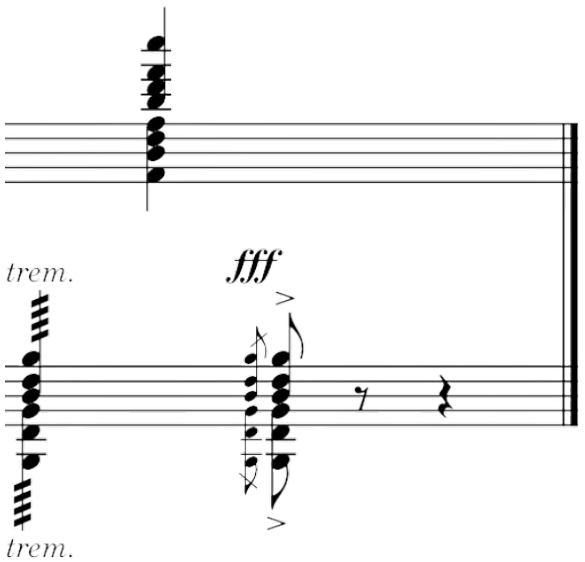
***This ending is the only one indicated in both original manuscripts. In the first bar, last system, all treble chords after whole note are written as octaves in manuscript.**

****The last measure of this work has been modified to adequate (more of so a mix of) Piano 1 and 2 as seen in the original manuscript. The performer may opt out of this ending and instead choose one of the given manuscript endings instead:**

Piano 1 (MS):

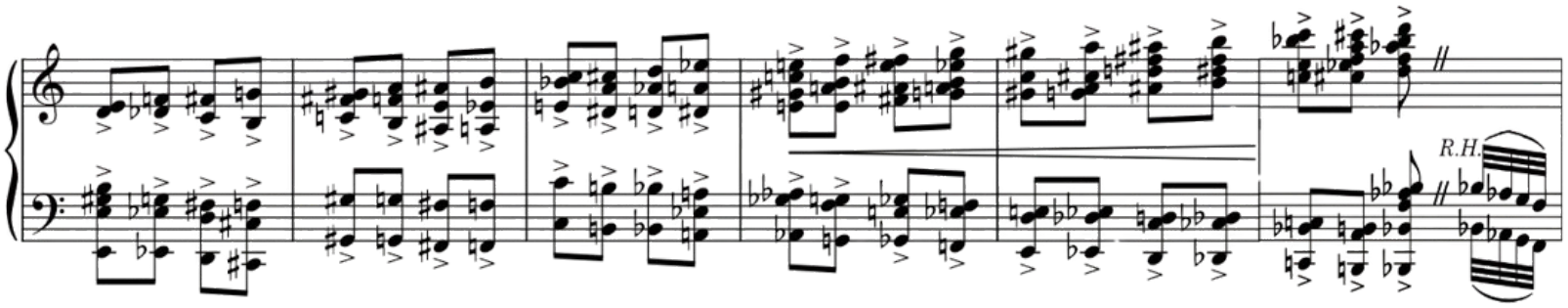
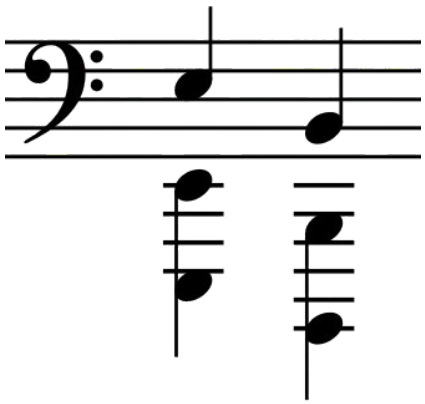


Piano 2 (MS):



Notes continued from page 35.

***Ossia: in both original manuscripts, no piano part is given. The orchestra part is offered here as another option.**



*****Ossia:**